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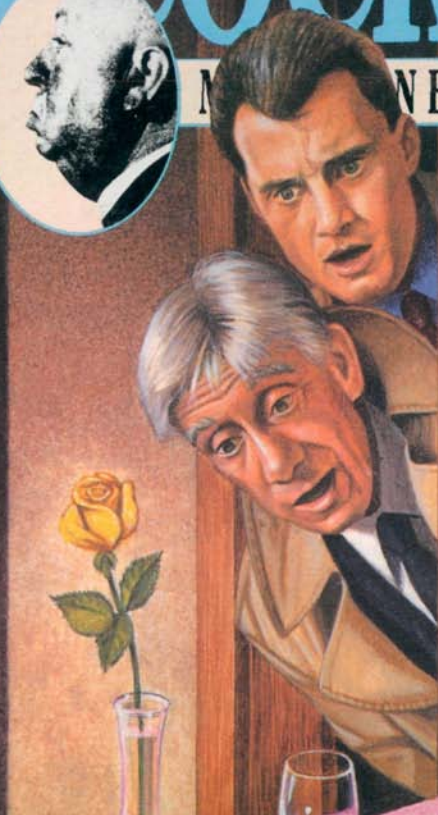


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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e are pleased, in this issue, to welcome back B. K. Stevens, author of our cover story, "True Romance." As you might have guessed from the title, if you've been with us for a couple of years, homicide detective Walt and his sidekick, Sergeant Bolt, are back at it, with a particularly thorny problem to solve.

This is their third collaboration in crimesolving in our pages; the first, "True Detective," appeared in our June 1988 issue, and the second, "True Confession," in May 1989.

Also in this issue . . . Stephen Wasylyk investigates the puzzle of a man in a bowler hat, Martin Limón takes us back to fifteenth century Korea, and Robert Loy follows an unfortunate fellow's most unexpected adventures after death. We think you'll be every bit as entertained by Joan Hess's

clever tale as we were, and as moved by Charles Ardai's. The Mystery Classic this time is one of John Dickson Carr's famous locked-room stories, set in an evil-sounding place called Goblin Wood.

In the August issue of AHMM, by the way, our Mystery Classic was Karel Čapek's "Footprints," which was about a trail of footprints on a snowy street that inexplicably stopped, with no trace of the person who made them. Coincidentally, in the present issue, more footprints have turned up. Jas. R. Petrin's amusing story "Human Man Gone" involves the same problem, and the Mysterious Photograph gives you an opportunity to solve another footprint puzzle for yourselves.

So, adjust that reading light, get comfortable, put your own feet up . . . and enjoy.

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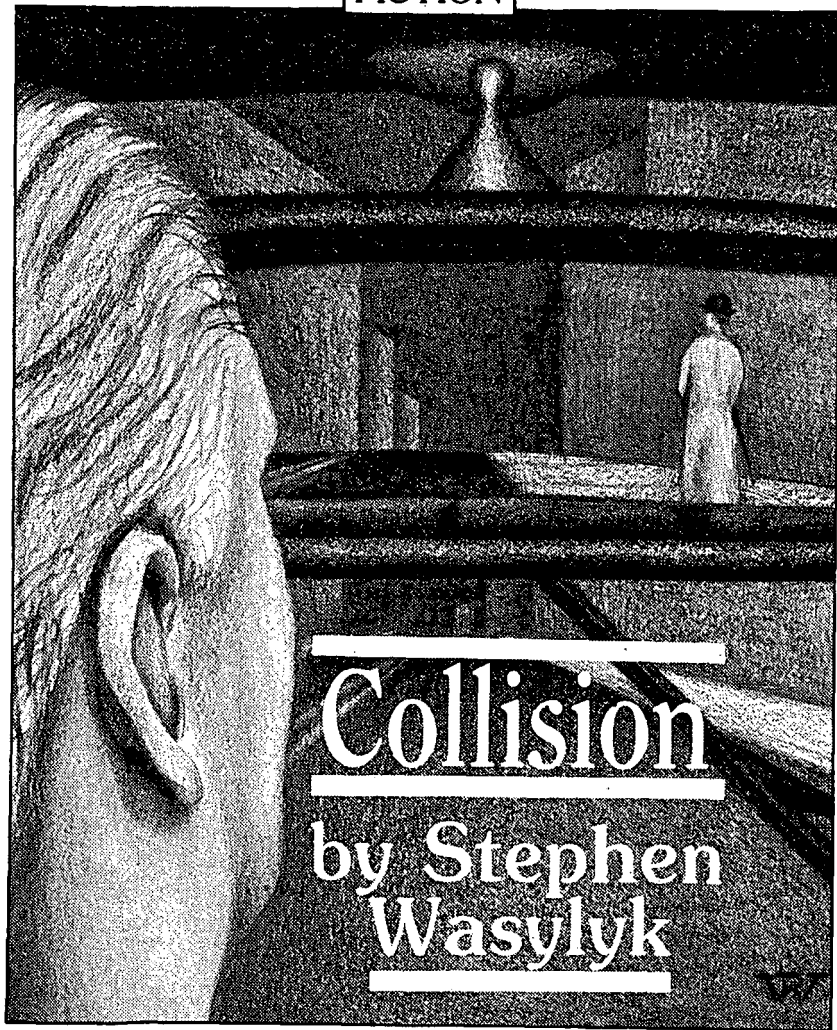
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**I**n the almost-midnight doldrums of the potted-shrubbed, marble-floored lobby of the Dorchester—which, for some reason, has to be the leading name in the English-speaking world for apartment

houses—the low hum of the descending elevator lifted the head of the security man at the desk.

Game time.

He'd invented The Game to enliven the most boring job he'd ever held, a view not entirely

inaccurate since in his younger days he'd done many things more exciting—and lucrative—than sitting at a desk and asking strangers to justify their presence.

All he had left from those glorious years was a fringe of hairs lingering like the dirty snow in the northern shade of the park fountain across the street, and an undiminished sense of humor—which was why he found it amusing that a seventy-year-old oversized leprechaun in a red uniform encrusted with gold braid should be entrusted with the pot o' gold security of some one hundred fifty tenants when all he had going for him was a big mouth and an Irish temper, neither of which had ever gotten him very far and would get him nowhere if someone large and mean ever told him to shut up and mind his own business.

As the floor-level lights winked off and on, he tried to guess which of the visitors scattered throughout the building would be revealed by the opening doors, immediately discarding lone males and females visiting each other. The cold, misty February rain would persuade more than a few of those to remain all night. Among other inducements. Leaving him with three middle-aged couples, two of whom were card players who always argued past midnight. Had to be the Rus-

sian weightlifter and her ninety-pound husband.

The light flashed *L* and kept going.

Game called.

The visitor, or tenant, was leaving through the underground parking garage, where it was possible to exit but impossible to enter without one of those magnetic door opening cards issued to a tenant in place of a key, keys being too easily duplicated. Also saving the management the cost of another security man at garage level.

Ah, well. If it wasn't a tenant but a visitor who had signed in, the name would stand alone in the morning, but if the visitor had arrived before sign-in time, then he, she, or they would disappear into the night like his lost hair.

He returned to his crossword puzzle—labeled extra hard—stumped by the intersection of two words: "Egyptian princess, Third Dynasty" and "rebase," whatever that was. He'd swear that the people who made up these things eventually backed themselves into a corner, which they got out of by coming up with a word that hadn't been seen in print for a hundred and fifty years except in the largest, thickest dictionary in the world.

But then he was old enough to know that no one ever played fair.

The woman on the fourth floor came out of a candlelight and roses dream that would have made an instant best-seller out of a romance novel and saw Johnny Carson talking to a blonde. The blonde's dress-maker had run out of red Span-dex after barely covering her vital parts, and her hair seemed not to have seen a comb or brush since puberty, which in her case was one helluva long time ago.

The woman finished the dregs of scotch diluted by melted ice cubes. The blonde, she knew, was universally hyped as a sex symbol by the media. One would think they would have something better to do with their high technology. Like showing in detail all the trimming, injecting, and tightening up to which certain members of the medical profession devoted their talents. There is no Fountain of Youth, dear. There is only me. My secretary will help you arrange a bank loan, of course.

Sex symbol, hell, the woman thought. She should be enshrined as a monument to cosmetic surgery.

Her husband was stretched out on the sofa, asleep.

She debated waking him to see if the barely covered creation of the surgeon's knife would generate a spark, decided that nothing on earth would, and went to the window, pulling her

quilted robe and boredom tightly around her as she stared down into the glistening street; a woman in her late thirties, hair dark and straight and cut short, possessing a generic face and figure that would neither repel anyone nor launch a thousand ships.

An occasional car passed, proof that life still existed. The sex symbol had been manufactured, and Carson might be an old tape, you know.

Before she had dozed off, while watching a heart-rending personal-tragedy drama, a well-heeled actress had been tearfully flagellating a neighbor with her obligation to contribute to society. The purpose of her impassioned speech was subtly to convey the same thought to the viewers, most of whom were either dozing off or looking forward to the next commercial.

Even the sex symbol would have been more entertaining—and no one could deny her contribution to society had been to advance plastic surgery by lightyears.

Ha. She herself had never contributed a thing to anyone or anything.

Maybe she should do what had been floating around in the back of her mind for months as she sat at her computer console—keyboard a very long stream of obscenities and send

it on its way deep into the Lord knew how many million bytes of information stored there, to be resurrected with a keystroke by some unsuspecting party. They'd never know where it originated, of course, and she could picture all the hysterical operators rolling on the floor and wishing they'd thought of it themselves.

A man crossed the street diagonally and stepped up on the curb, heading for the broad avenue on the other side of the park. He was wearing a bowler hat and a tan Burberry and was swinging a walking stick.

Hey, Twilight Zone.

She'd been transported from a nothing job, a zero marriage, and a numb husband to misty London.

Where was the fog? Damned director forgot the fog.

A bowler. A walking stick.

She watched him disappear into the night like her dreams and wondered what it would be like to go to bed with a man who walked around wearing a bowler and carrying a walking stick.

The back support belt the cabbie's wife had insisted he wear—nine ninety-five, satisfaction guaranteed, call our 800 number—wasn't doing a damned thing more for him than the back support cushion she'd ordered last month.

What she didn't understand

was that it wasn't muscles. It was the irritation, and no one was selling anything—for nine ninety-five or any other price—that could eliminate that.

He waited until the young fare who reminded him of his daughter entered the brownstone before letting the clutch up. Fare: four eighty-five. Fifteen cent tip.

He'd figured it all out long ago. With a four fifty minimum, your tip was anything between that and five dollars. Break five—like five twenty-five—and they handed you six. If the fare went up to five ninety, you still got the six.

Padding the tip with coins or paper seemed to be against the law.

Okay, anyone would tell you that over a period of time the small tips and the large ones would even out. What no one said was that some entire nights—*entire nights*—would be ten and fifteen centers, but damned if he could remember any that were all eighty centers or more.

No wonder his back hurt.

Windshield wipers sweeping, windows half steamed, he turned the corner, his headlights picking up an imperious, upraised cane in the hand of a man veering toward the curb.

The man entered, slumped back, and said, "Sheraton."

Great. Another ten center and no way to avoid it because



the Sheraton was straight down the avenue and he had no excuse for making a turn—just a little run around the block—that would add enough to break five. Unless the angel overseeing cabbies blessed him with a traffic jam, which at this hour wasn't likely. The angel, like sensible angels everywhere, was probably asleep, resting up for a water main break tomorrow.

He glanced into the mirror at the silhouette of the bowler. He hadn't seen one since the last St. Patrick's Day parade, and those had been green, but if a bowler was the only unusual thing he'd see on this shift, he'd wear the support instead of sending it back because it would prove that hope for mankind still existed.

The street grew brighter with store lights and neon, the glistering sidewalks almost empty except for a pneumonia-defying hooker here and there. Through snow and rain—postmen had nothing on them when it came to devotion to their chosen profession.

As he'd thought, the fare was four ninety. Five dollar bill. Big spender, Mr. Bowler. And no fare to pick up. He couldn't blame anyone for staying where they were. Thirty-five degrees and raining. The heater couldn't throw out enough heat to keep the cab windows clear.

He made an illegal U-turn

farther down the block to see if the guests at the Marriott were more hardy and adventuresome, slipping behind two cabs already there.

Walking fast, cane swinging, Mr. Bowler burst into, through, and out of the glare of the marquee lights so quickly the cabbie almost missed him.

Ignoring the strain on his aching back, he twisted to watch as the man—framed in the clear spot on the foggy back window like the view through a glaucoma eye—turned the corner.

Bowler had known the fare to the Sheraton would be under five, so that's where he'd gone. He'd walk the rest of the way. In that cold rain, it couldn't have been far. Maybe five twenty-five or five fifty. Saved himself a buck.

Want to know why my back hurts? I'll tell you why my back hurts.

**G**anz fingered through the clothing in the dresser drawer. All good labels, like those hanging in the closet.

Behind him, Polansky's voice rumbled up from the depths of his beer belly. "Now that you've gotten your kicks for the day pawing through the lady's undies, can we get on with finding out who killed her?"

Beyond the lieutenant, Arroyo placed his fingertips to-

gether and looked at the ceiling. Probably praying for Polansky's immediate demise, thought Ganz. Like a great many others, including the two former Mrs. Polanskys and probably the present one.

"Talk to me," said Polansky.

"The forensic teams and the body left about ten minutes ago. Her name was Sylvia Carroll. She died sometime before midnight when someone behind her clamped some sort of rod across her throat, crushing her trachea and larynx. As the M.E. says, she strangled on the debris. She owned a dress shop a few blocks away. When she didn't show this morning, the woman who works with her phoned, got no answer, walked over and persuaded the building manager to open the door. On the surface it looks as though it might be easy. No sign of a break-in, so she must have let the perpetrator in. Hopefully, someone she knew."

"Husband? Lover? What?"

"Widow. As far as the woman who worked with her knows, no lover on record, but then no one knows everything about someone else."

Polansky nodded. "Okay. You know what to do."

Arroyo sighed. "Talk to everyone."

"Big apartment house," said Ganz. "How about a little help?"

Polansky glared at him. "Did

Holmes and Watson need help? Did Batman and Robin need help? Did Nick and Nora Charles need help?"

Polansky stalked out.

"You know," said Ganz, "I'll bet we average a killing a year in a Dorchester. Dorchester Arms, Dorchester Towers, Dorchester Mews. Something about the name must be hazardous to a person's health."

Arroyo's mind was on something else.

"Who in the hell are Nick and Nora Charles?"

"Polansky never sleeps. He sits up all night drinking beer and watching old movies like *The Thin Man*. Nick and Nora Charles. Detectives. William Powell and Myrna Loy. Had a little dog."

"Been studying to go on *Jeopardy*?"

"I was born wise and all knowing. Where do you want to start?"

Arroyo appeared thoughtful.

"Which of us is Nick and which is Nora?"

"Straighten your nylons and pick up the dog," said Ganz.

Arroyo tapped at the door of the fourth floor apartment, the fifteenth on his list. So far, nothing. No responses from several, no help in those that had responded, although he'd been offered coffee in two, a drink in one, and had been

propositioned in eight, which was understandable because he was six feet tall, had dark curly hair, and faintly resembled Lorenzo Lamas.

The woman was wearing dark blue slacks, a white blouse, and a red bandanna around her head. Very patriotic. Not bad looking. Dependable, no nonsense, no-surprises-about-her type. Coffee or drink but no proposition.

She held out a dustcloth apologetically. "I work part time. Get home in time to do the cleaning."

She looked at the picture Arroyo handed her. Saw her in the elevator a few times, but didn't know her. Couldn't help but notice, you know. Tall, willowy, blonde. Wished she could look like that. Wished she could afford to dress like that.

Nothing to envy, said Arroyo. She's dead.

She said she was sorry.

Arroyo got the impression that she wasn't too sorry and that if she could look like that and dress like that for a while, being dead wouldn't matter.

Had she seen or heard anything unusual last night?

Unusual? In *her* life?

Arroyo was patient. Any little thing out of the ordinary.

Does something out of the Twilight Zone count?

*Twilight Zone*? She didn't look flaky.

Like what?

Maybe she should have said a movie. She led him to the window. Like a man in a bowler hat and a tan raincoat and carrying a walking stick. In the mist. In the rain. A Stranger Stalks the Streets.

What time?

Carson had come on and it wasn't midnight yet. He crossed the street diagonally and went that way.

Toward the avenue?

She nodded.

*A bowler? A cane?*

Arroyo thanked her.

She stared at the door after he'd left, wondering what it would be like to sleep with a slim Hispanic with wide shoulders and curly black hair who looked a little like Lorenzo Lamas.

The day man had never seen a man wearing a bowler and carrying a walking stick pass through the lobby.

Arroyo's call woke up the oversized-leprechaun / security guard.

No, said the leprechaun. Doesn't mean anything, though.

Why not?

If they don't want us to see who they're sleeping with, they bring them in through the garage, and the lucky lover, man or woman, recognizing equal rights, you know, can leave the same way. When the moon is

full, that elevator goes up and down like a yo-yo.

You watch the elevator?

The leprechaun told him about The Game.

So?

So the leprechaun told him about the elevator last night.

Arroyo went down to the garage, walked out of the entrance at the side of the building, and crossed the street. He looked up at the patriotic woman's window.

A bowler hat and a walking stick. A cane. Toward the avenue.

Arroyo smiled. He'd bet that Nora solved most of them.

**G**anz, said Arroyo, rolled along like a tank stuck in low gear. Everything bounced off him. That was why no one had ever seen him excited or angry or heard him raise his voice. Nothing penetrated.

In the office of the closed dress shop, Ganz considered whether the emaciated former-employee/body-discoverer before him could have killed her employer over something like a wage dispute, and declared her innocent. Sylvia Carrol couldn't be considered muscular, but this one had the shape of an exclamation mark; spooning out a cup of yogurt would exhaust her.

She was wearing at least a

hundred dollars' worth of cosmetics, most of them applied liberally around the eyes. He hadn't known they made false lashes that long. Her brunette hair was a cap of tight curls, large golden hoops dangled from her ears, and she was wearing a tight, low-cut red silk print that ended well above knobby knees that should have been hidden from everyone except her mother.

Somehow, though, she looked good. Unreal, but good.

Sylvia was going to sell the shop to me, you know. She intended to live abroad for a while. England. She was over there on a visit last year and loved it.

He waved at the shop.

Could she have afforded something like that?

Why not? The shop was doing well.

Not according to the accountant and the lawyer he'd talked to. She owed almost everyone in the country and a few overly trusting firms overseas.

Maybe I can still buy it.

He'd bet the lawyer would be glad to *give* her the place. Less work for him as executor. The will left everything to a cousin in Portland, and what did cousins in Portland know?

Men, he said. Let's get back to men.

They came and went. Seemed to be in a hiatus lately. We all go through those, don't we?

The enormous eyelashes fluttered like a used car dealer's pennants.

That we do, he thought, as he copied down the names she gave him. His was pushing ten months.

What did she do in her spare time?

Nothing special. Concerts, theater. Liked to travel most of all. Frequently took a few days off to visit different cities. Getting to know America.

Where did she hang out?

Hang out?

Favorite spots. Bars. Restaurants. We all have them.

None that I know of. Perhaps Luigi's. Had lunch there frequently. *I don't eat lunch.*

Of course.

Heading toward the door, he paused, wondering what she *really* looked like and thinking that beneath it all lurked a nice kid.

If you still want to buy the shop, don't make an offer, he said. Ask the lawyer how much and then laugh very loudly.

Her eyes narrowed. You know something, don't you?

Me? What would I know about dress shops?

The ambience of Luigi's—the red-checked tablecloths, rickety bentwood chairs, and spicy, unidentified smells—was out of 1932 Naples.

Not the hostess, though, who

would make the oversized leprechaun's heart burst with ethnic pride. Ganz's, being some thirty-five years younger, picked up speed and made the blood roar in his ears. He wondered what the Gaelic words were for *Mama mia*.

Her hair was auburn, her eyes blue, and her skin as creamy as the soft smoke of peat. The blue dress matched her eyes and the blue pumps matched the dress, and the long lashes hadn't come in a tiny plastic case, but it really wasn't all that simple. It never was, in spite of what the hair, cosmetic, and fashion people—and cosmetic surgeons—told the female world. There had to be something more, like the awe and wonder created by a great piece of music. Like Shubert's Eighth.

He considered taking a table and ordering everything on the menu so that he could sit and look at her all afternoon.

After a smile that sent him floating by the Telstar satellite, he screeched down to a two hundred mile an hour landing and asked, What's a nice Irish girl like you doing in a place like this?

She told him to ask a question that had to do with his investigation or she'd call a real cop. An Irish one.

He held up a photograph of Sylvia Carrol.



She knew her. Came in often. Alone?

Came in alone. Didn't always lunch alone. Sometimes met a man.

There were many men. What distinguished this one from the rest?

He had lunch with Sylvia Carrol.

He knew a needle when he felt one.

What did he look like?

Six feet. Thin. Bony. Hair streaked with gray like his mustache. Good dresser. English gentleman type.

English?

Trust someone Irish to know someone English.

An English name, perhaps? Like on a credit card?

She nodded. Very perceptive for a non-Irish detective. He always paid in cash, except once when he must have been short and used American Express. Andrew Broughton-Brown. She couldn't help remembering a name like that. Andrew B-B.

Andrew B-B. He gazed upon her with delight.

How would she classify the relationship?

Intimate.

So there had been no hiatus after all.

Intimate?

They argued. In a gentle way. The way people in love do.

He felt warm at the thought

of spending a lifetime arguing with her. In a gentle way.

Where can he be found?

She shrugged. They didn't ask for an address or phone number if the card was approved.

Several final questions. Vital to the investigation. Was she married or otherwise unavailable for interrogation?

No.

Her home phone number?

Was *he* married?

He spread his hands.

Did he look dumb enough to marry a woman dumb enough to marry a detective?

She gave him the number.

He floated out to meet Arroyo.

Arroyo sat on Ganz's desk. No autopsy report until tomorrow.

Not going to change the way she died, said Ganz. There were times when he wished the murderer would die in the same way as his victim.

Arroyo asked where in the hell he'd ever find *another* one crazy enough to repeat some of the things they'd seen.

They tossed it back and forth.

The leprechaun had heard a descending elevator, and the patriotic woman had noticed a man in a bowler, wearing a tan coat and carrying a walking stick, leave the Dorchester shortly before midnight; a man

no one else in the apartment house apparently had ever seen.

The Irish beauty had said Sylvia Carrol occasionally lunched with an English type named Andrew Broughton-Brown, a person she seemed to have kept a secret even though it appeared to be a romance. Now why would an unencumbered, consenting adult want to keep her conquest of an Englishman a secret? It wasn't as though it would have been easy, like taking home a Frenchman. Or even an Italian.

Interesting to find out why she kept him under wraps. She should have displayed him like a bargain found in a duty-free air terminal shop.

Now it *was* possible that a true blue American could well have been wearing that bowler and carrying that cane—a Democrat, of course, not a Republican, since Democrats more than Republicans were known for weird forms of dress, if you didn't count that state senator in the pink tutu they'd stumbled across last week.

On the other hand, wasn't a *real* Englishman more likely to be carrying an umbrella rather than a walking stick, especially since it had been raining? Unless, of course, he'd left it at home in England under the impression so common around the world that the United States was perpetually sunny, which

was why everyone wanted to come here.

Still, it had to be more than coincidence. Sylvia Carrol visits England. When she returns, she seems to have acquired an English gentleman she keeps under cover in more ways than one—maybe she smuggled him in for her own personal use and kept him a secret so he couldn't sample the variety of other dishes on the American menu. Then a man who dresses like an Englishman is seen leaving her apartment building on the night she's murdered. Poor payment, indeed, for Sylvia's daring.

What they needed was to locate Andrew B-B and ask him to clarify their confusion, but the computer at American Express, while it could give them his London address, had absolutely no idea where to find him in the United States, and neither did his bank. Nor Scotland Yard. Or the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which, of course, made Arroyo chuckle.

Andrew B-B, like millions of others, had lost himself among the huddled masses yearning to be free, even though he did wear a bowler.

All they could do was have him flagged down if he attempted to leave the country to return to his own, his native land.

Except—

He'd been walking toward

the avenue. In the rain. Toward the subway. But no Englishman wearing a bowler and carrying a walking stick could ride the subway at midnight without its coming to their immediate attention as another item on the list of the night's deprecations, although it would be far down on the list with the other muggings.

Post a notice in the downtown garages of the three major cab companies to see if anyone had picked him up, and if not, go to the independents.

Denardo walked up and handed a sheet to each of them from a sheaf under his arm.

Forget it, said Arroyo. I'm not joining your bowling team.

Wouldn't have nobody who looks like Lorenzo Lamas, said Denardo. This is a composite of the broad hitting the jewelry stores.

There were three sketches on the sheet. The hairstyles were different, labeled red, blonde, and brunette, but the faces were all the same. If it wasn't Sylvia Carrol, it was her sister.

Different hairstyle and color each time, said Denardo. Wigs. Contacts too, because the eyes were different colors. Ought to be a law against using that stuff for criminal purposes. Never knew who the hell you're looking for. (Or what you were getting—Denardo would never reveal that little episode.)

Ganz had sat in on the initial conference.

Well-dressed, goodlooking woman comes in, asks to see some rings. Salesperson produces tray. Salesperson gets phone call. No one on the line. Comes back. Woman selects something at low end of price range or decides not to buy. Salesperson replaces tray. Nothing missing. Day or so later, maybe someone notices one of the real expensive pieces has suddenly become paste.

Nothing new. Probably first turned up two thousand years ago in a Mideast bazaar, or one in China or India, and refined through the centuries.

Took two people. One goes in a day or two ahead, memorizes a piece, duplicates it in paste. The other takes the duplicate in, asks to see some jewelry. First person calls, asks for salesperson by name. Even though the absence is immediately covered by another salesperson, there is a moment or two when no eye is on the tray, which is when the switch is made. Just to be on the safe side, the diamond is passed on the moment it goes through the door, so that if a sharp-eyed salesperson runs yelling after the thief, there is no diamond. Only the threat of a lawsuit.

Good only for a short run in any city before the word spreads and salespeople start riveting

eyes on trays and refusing phone calls.

Arroyo, who had seen the same thing in the sketches that Ganz had, was at the phone, the beeping numbers sounding like a synthesizer concert. Scotland Yard could tell them if diamonds disappeared out of jewelry stores while she was over there. They also wanted to know what business Andrew B-B was in.

As if they didn't already know.

**T**he cabbie pointed at the flyer on the garage wall. He'd picked up the guy with the bowler and the walking stick—unless he had a twin. Which wasn't too far-fetched when you considered the city already featured one famous multiple tourist attraction in Maggie, Meggie, and Mavis, the hooker triplets. Bowlered twins carrying walking sticks would fit right in.

Unaware that the cabbie had pulled the Velcro straps of the back support belt as tightly as possible, Ganz looked at his bulging eyes and wondered if his obvious physical disability, whatever it was, affected him mentally—unaware also that the same doubt had caused many a yesteryear suitor to pass up an appealing, but tightly corseted, prospective bride.

In breathless, halting sentences, the cabbie ventured the

opinion that on second thought, maybe Bowler wasn't being cheap in getting out where he did. Maybe he just didn't want him to know where he was going. If that was the case, he should have paid the buck and saved himself a few raindrops.

Why?

Ain't nothin' around that corner but office buildings, and they're closed at that hour. Except for that little hotel.

Ganz, still wondering what malady made his eyes bulge, revised his opinion of the cabbie's mental abilities upward.

Once the epitome of elegance, now surviving as a genteel rooming house offering special rates for fascinated foreigners absorbing Americana during prolonged visits, the hotel reminded Ganz of one he had seen in an Agatha Christie movie: carpet so intricately Oriental it should have been hanging on a wall, the lobby walnut-dark, the three people in the soft chairs hiding behind wide open newspapers. He half expected Miss Marple to traipse around the corner and brightly announce she'd discovered a body in the dining room.

The plump little manager, who could have been Hercule Poirot without the mustache, said, yes, Andrew Broughton-Brown had been a guest for several months, using the hotel as

a base while traveling around the country gathering material for a book. When shown Sylvia Carrol's picture, he identified her as Mr. Broughton-Brown's agent and a frequent visitor, who often accompanied him on his trips.

That brought a significant glance from Arroyo because Denardo had later informed them that, through the magic of fax machines, Sylvia Carrol had been identified as the woman who had ripped off jewelry stores in various cities. The colors of wigs and contact lenses were, after all, limited. Furthermore, neither changed facial characteristics, a willowy body, or the shape of great legs, a unique identification feature that was contributed by a male chauvinist clerk in Detroit, immediately confirmed by the closet sexists in the other stores, and explained why their concentration had drifted from the jewelry trays.

Even more noteworthy, a postscript on the information sheets noted that an English-type white male also had been perpetrating the same crime—in stores with female clerks, of course. Their descriptions were confined to the man's facial features. Unlike their male counterparts, they had delicately left unmentioned other physical characteristics which obviously had diverted their

attention from the trays.

There might possibly be a connection.

Ganz and Arroyo had no doubt about it whatsoever.

A motive for the murder of Sylvia Carrol leaped into focus.

Andrew B-B had forgotten his nursery school admonitions that we must all share, but then his teachers had been referring to toys and cookies, not diamonds, and diamonds had been destroying nobility in human hearts for many centuries. While the song claimed they were a girl's best friend, many men also found their qualities equally comforting on cold winter nights.

All that was necessary now was to collar Andrew.

They were fortunate, said the manager. He was still here, although expected to check out shortly for a Caribbean cruise because of the beastly weather. Unless he had already departed by way of the fire escape; a light-hearted, chuckling comment made to emphasize how utterly ridiculous that would be for one of *his* guests.

They both chuckled with him at such a preposterous notion.

Then Arroyo went around to the alley while Ganz mounted the stairs to Andrew B-B's room.

Andrew B-B had closed and locked the suitcase, made certain his passport and tickets



were in his jacket pocket, and picked up his walking stick. Too bad about Sylvia, but she should have realized that two could *not* live as cheaply as one, particularly in the social circles he preferred.

She hadn't understood why he refused to allow her to show him off, but he wasn't here on holiday, was he. The less they were seen together, the better. That was why he'd checked into the hotel instead of staying with her, even though the exorbitant rates would reduce his profit margin.

*Open up! Police!*

Ganz's thunderous fist and deep baritone shook him all the way down to his brogues. Clearly, in spite of his precautions, they'd somehow discovered he'd been behaving rather badly as a guest in the country. To preserve his well-being and freedom and avoid disgrace to the family name—indeed, to Merrie England itself—prudence dictated an immediate departure via the window, as ignominious as that might be for someone of his station.

Opening it quietly and clutching his suitcase and walking stick, he stepped out onto the fire escape.

The cold rain of the last few days had finally turned to snow. The smooth metal of the fire escape steps, colder than the ambient temperature, had so-

lidified the first wet flakes into a thin layer of ice masked by a steadily deepening, innocent layer of white.

He gingerly negotiated two flights before noticing a smiling Arroyo, who had known all along it was Nora who always brought the culprit to justice, peering up at him through the heavily falling flakes.

Needing time to consider this unsportsmanlike maneuver, he tried to halt on a landing. One foot slid. Off balance, he went into an excellent imitation of a pratfall comedian—legs flailing, torso a berserk pendulum. He lost the suitcase, which bounced once on its way to the ground. He lost the bowler, which skimmed through the falling snow like a UFO coming in for a radar-guided landing in bad weather.

His impromptu dance ended when both feet suddenly became airborne simultaneously, unfortunately as he was leaning forward, and he belly-flopped down the next flight, still clutching his stick.

Halfway down, the ferrule snagged on one stanchion of the narrow fire escape and flipped the head up against another.

Deceptively strong though hollow, that slim barrier kept him from tobogganing off the fire escape before it snapped and showered Arroyo with a sleetlike cascade of diamonds

that stung his face, pitter-pattered on his hat, and left little pepper-like holes in the pristine snow—saving them the trouble of shredding the suitcase, his clothes, the bowler, and perhaps even Andrew himself while looking for the stolen gems.

Ganz carefully rationed his glances across the dinner table because looking at the Irish beauty for more than ten seconds at a time made him too light-headed to mull over the host of circumstances that caused Fate to point a stern index finger at Andrew B-B.

Detective by trade but philosopher by inclination, he concluded that those who rush toward extinction in the fast lane are often totaled by innumerable random collisions with people they have no idea exist, and it had taken but three more—with the security guard, the patriotic woman, and the cab-

bie—to demolish Andrew B-B. But then Andrew B-B was already so full of dents, he'd been on his way to the junkyard anyway.

He refused to allow a larger question to drive him bananas, as larger philosophical questions have a tendency to do, which is why many philosophers are considered to be missing on one, if not several, cylinders.

Namely, when Andrew B-B had taken his header down the stairs, what strange and mysterious metaphysical force caused that walking stick to catch him full in the throat and crush his trachea and larynx?

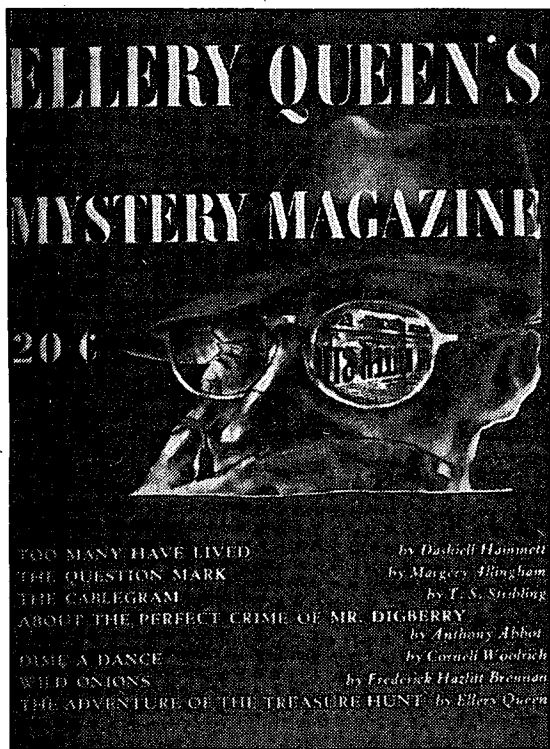
Controlling an impulse to perform a wild jig among the black-tied, bug-eyed waiters to celebrate the Irish beauty's presence, he smiled at her over the roast duck.

There were, after all, some questions no man could ever answer.

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FICTION

# A Little More Research

by Joan  
Hess

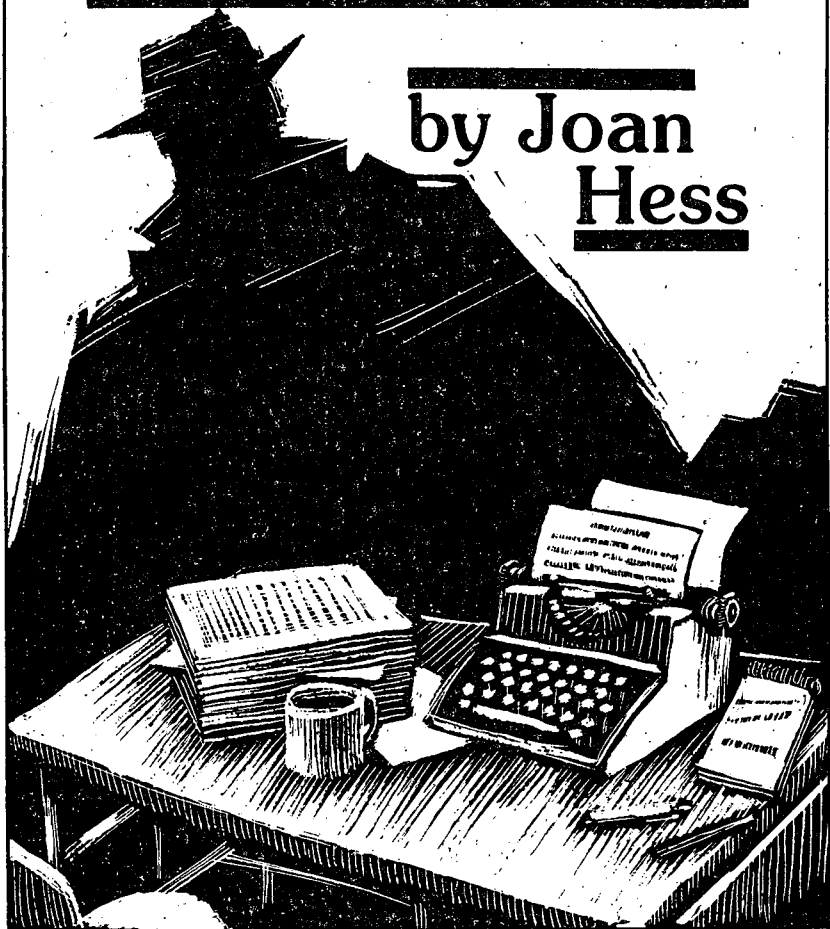


Illustration by Timothy Foley

22

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**B**art Bellicose realized time was running out. In the distance, he could hear the whine of sirens, and he knew the police cars were closing in on him like a swarm of killer bees. He stepped back, then threw his two hundred forty pounds of bulk against the flimsy door. It gave way with a shriek of pain, and Bellicose stumbled into the apartment.

There on the carpet lay the mortal remains of his client. Even in death, the semi-nude body was as undulating as the ocean, as smooth as the inner petals of a rose. He could see that his client was as dead as the proverbial doornail, one of which had ripped his arms in an angry slash of

"Terry, honey, when are you gonna be finished? I'm getting hungry, and it's almost too late to make reservations."

"I've asked you not to interrupt me. The deadline's tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, for pete's sake, and my editor's about to have an apoplectic fit. I can't concentrate when you come in here every five minutes."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I get all lonesome out there by myself. Maybe it would help if I rubbed your neck . . . ?"

"It would not. I'm on the last chapter and I need to get it done tonight. Please don't interrupt me any more."

"Okay, I'll be a good little guest and wait in the living room. All by myself."

"Thank you so very much. And shut the door, will you?"  
grinning blood. It was obvious to anyone who'd ever eyed a fresh corpse that the

"Don't let me disturb you, but how about if I make reservations for later just in case you get done with your story?"

"I'm not going to get done if you don't leave me alone. I told you when you insisted on coming over tonight that I absolutely must have peace and quiet in order to concentrate."

"I happen to be speaking very quietly, my dear Hot Shot Writer."

"You also happen to be standing in the doorway, which means I'm looking at you rather than at the word processor. Go ahead and make reservations any place you want. I really don't care."

"Well, maybe I'll just do that."

It was obvious that . . . It was obviously murder. Bart could see that as he stared at the Bart frowned at the gaping Bart gasped as he spotted the hilt of the dagger protruding from the contoured chest

"Honey, telephone."

"I'm not home. Take a message and I'll call back tomorrow."

There was something about the dagger that touched a raw nerve. He'd seen it

"It's your editor, and he sounds real mad."

"Tell him I'm not here, and close the door on your way out."

"But I already told him you were home and working real hard on the story. He says he wants to talk to you right this minute."

"All right, damn it."

before. Sorry, Bart. Back in a minute. Try to remember, huh?

"Yo, Terry baby, how's it going?"

"It was going quite well until you called and interrupted me, Irwin. You do realize every time I'm interrupted I lose my train of thought?"

"Right, right. I wanted to remind you that we go into production tomorrow, with or without the last chapter. The book's gonna look pretty funny with a bunch of blank pages at the end. You promised me this manuscript. We paid a fat advance, and then waited patiently while you missed not one but two deadlines. You're in the catalogue. I've held the production people back till the bitter end, but the bottom line is that's where we are."

"And I'm not in my office finishing the book. *Au contraire*, I'm standing in the kitchen chitchatting with you. Goodbye, Irwin. I'll be in your office at nine o'clock."

"You and Bellicose, I presume."

"At this very moment Bellicose is standing over a body, and he'd like to investigate in the immediate future."

"So you finally got the plot straightened out?"

"Yes, I finally got the plot straightened out. Tomorrow at nine, okay? We can celebrate with Danishes."

"I'll get a dozen of them. Just make sure you show up for the party."

"I'm hanging up now, Irwin. Next time you get lonely, call your ex-wife."

He'd seen the dagger somewhere. Great.

Forget the dagger.

Bart stared at the bullet hole in the forehead. It was a third eye, as unseeing as the deep blue pools he'd

"Are you off the telephone?"

"No, I had the receiver implanted in my head and I'm listening to the time and weather as we speak. What is it?"

"I was trying to catch you before you started writing again to

ask if you think Chinese sounds good. Or Japanese, I suppose, but not squid or tofu or anything creepy like that."

"I don't care. Do you mind? I mean, do you really mind giving me more than three minutes undisturbed?"

"I was just asking. You're acting like you've forgotten about last night. You didn't object to my company then."

"When I get this story done, maybe I'll remember. Please?"

"I'll sit in the living room and be as quiet as a mouse."

Deep blue pools of squid ink. On tofu.

Deadline. Deadline. Deadlineeeeeee.

Bart recognized from the size of the wound that the bullet was of a low caliber. Could it have involved the swarthy woman with the mustache who'd come to his office yesterday, the one who'd cried and begged him to help her save her missing dauuuuuu

"What was that, damn it?"

"Don't pay any attention, Terry. I'll clean it up. After all, I don't have anything else to do."

"Clean what up?"

"Don't worry about it. It's no big deal."

"How can you say it was no big deal? It sounded like a friggin' nuclear explosion."

"I don't remember seeing you at Hiroshima. Just go back to work and stop yelling at me like I was some kind of kid or something. I said I'd clean it up."

"Was it the plate glass window?"

"Go back to work."

"The television? My new state-of-the-art television that I have three years to pay on?"

"No, and leave me alone so I can clean it up. I thought you had a deadline tomorrow . . ."

ghter. Bart stared around the room, which looked as if a nuclear bomb had gone off minutes before. The plate glass window was a spiderweb of cracks, and the television, a particularly expensive model with remote, built-in video cassette recorder, quadrophonic stereo, and one hundred thirty-seven channel capacity, was nothing more than a smoldering ruin of useless wires and busted tubes and would still suck up thirty-five more monthly payments.

But Bart warned himself not to dwell on the devastation and bent over the body. The flesh was still warm, and a ribbon of blood flowed from one corner of the mouth, which was twisted into a faint smile of surprise. So the victim had known the perp, Bart decided

as he reached into his pocket and took out a pack of

"Did you take my cigarettes?"

"What?"

"I said, did you come into my office and take the pack of cigarettes I keep in the bottom left drawer for emergencies?"

"It was an emergency. I was out."

"Well, so am I. Bring that pack back."

"I smoked all of them this afternoon while I was watching this really great old movie about this debutante that falls in love with her sister's—"

"I'll read the newspaper if I want a review. Go down to the deli and get me another pack. You know I can't write when I'm out of cigarettes."

"No way. It's already late and I'm not about to get myself mugged just because you want a pack of cigarettes. It's your crummy neighborhood, not mine. If you're so desperate, go get them yourself."

Bart realized there was no time for a cigarette, not with the police moving in like a pack of vicious, slobbering wolves. Despite the sense of panic that could be appeased only by a cigarette, by a long deep satisfying lungful of carbon monoxide flavored with nicotine, he reluctantly turned back to the body, keenly aware that the evidence before him would lead to the identity of the murderer.

The clue was there before his eyes. He could almost see it, almost touch it, almost smell it, that acrid redolence of smoldering

"I smell smoke. What the hell's burning?"

"Nothing, Terry."

"Don't give me that. I smell smoke. I smell cigarette smoke, damn it! I thought you said the pack was empty."

"Don't short out your pacemaker over it. There was one cigarette left in the pack, that's all."

"The pack that you stole from my office? Is that the pack we're talking about? I cannot believe you would not only steal the pack from my desk, but then lie and say it was empty while sneaking the last cigarette!"

"If you keeping huffing and puffing like that, you're gonna blow the door down. I am sitting in here on the sofa holding my breath so I won't disturb you, and it seems to me you're the one bellowing and snorting and carrying on like a baby who wants a lollipop. It's like you've got some kind of oral fixation or something."

"First you steal my emergency pack, then you—"

"This is very childish. Perhaps you might worry a little less about

me and a little more about the deadline tomorrow morning?"

The lingering smoke meant nothing, Bart thought with a snarl. No, the clue, the goddamn clue

No, now he could see what must have happened in the seedy apartment. The jagged corner of yellow paper beside the body was the exact same shade as the scrap he'd found at the nightclub. And that explained it. Yes! Yes!!! It was the link to the woman who'd lost a daughter, and it was the link to the strange fellow in the fedora who'd been following Bart for all those long days while he'd been on the case. It was as if the sun had finally broken the horizon after so many long weeks of arctic winter.

Bart smiled as the police stormed the room, their revolvers aimed at his heart. He knew he could explain

"Terry, I made reservations at that Thai restaurant everybody talks about all the time. We need to leave pretty soon if we're going to get there on time."

"Screw the Thai restaurant."

Bart held up the scrap of paper and said

"They're always packed, and the only reason we got the reservation is because a bunch of Shriners got drunk in the bar and refused to eat."

"Screw the Shriners."

Bart said screw the shriners oh hell come on bart you know who did it and who that fedora dude is and the scrap of yellow paper come on bart bellicose don't forget you can remember you had it a minute ago and it was good bart it was good and it was tight and it was right up there with brilliant and

it is gone finito ciao adios arrivederci

"Is everything okay, Terry? You're making an awfully funny noise in there."

"Don't worry about me. See, here I am in the kitchen and I'm just fine. As soon as I find a certain something in the drawer, I'm coming in the living room. Why don't you fix us a nice drink?"

Bart Bellicose left the police station, trying not to strut as he remembered how deftly he'd wrapped up the case in a pink bow to hand over to the detectives. They had listened in awe as he'd explained how his client, an errant husband with a fondness for exotic dancers, had blackmailed the sultry, smoky-eyed postal carrier who moonlighted at the Turkish Bizarre. The chump had opened the door to sign the yellow slip for a registered letter. Now his coffin and the case were closed.

There would be another case tomorrow, another chance to outwit the police. But for the moment, Bart savored this victory. If you wanted a case solved—and you wanted it solved right—then you called Bart Bellicose, by damn.

The End.

Yahooooooooooooo.

“Yo, Terry, what time is it? Lemme get the light. Jeez, it’s after midnight and I got to face the production guys in the morning.”

“Stop at the bakery on your way to work, Irwin. Bart Bellicose has pulled it off again.”

“It’s done? You got it done? Lordy, I was sweating in my sleep for you. I’m not kidding; my pajamas are sticking to my armpits. All those glitches in the plot, those false starts and stops . . . I can’t believe it.”

“I’ll admit I was having trouble with it. I just couldn’t get a handle on the corpse sprawled on the living room floor. I couldn’t see him, if you know what I mean. I couldn’t touch his body, smell his blood, analyze his expression of surprise and fear.”

“But you figured something out, huh?”

“With a little help from a friend.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Hey, I’ve got a bottle of twelve-year-old scotch I’ve been saving for my son’s wedding. Now he says he wants to be a priest. Hop a cab and come on over to celebrate. Bring your friend.”

“A fine idea, Irwin, although I’m afraid my friend’s not up to a small party. I’ll stop at the deli for a pack of cigarettes and be over shortly.”

“Then be careful. You may write the hardest boiled private eye series in the industry, but you look more like a genteel lady librarian from Phoenix. Too bad Bart can’t come along as your bodyguard. So tell me the truth—how’d you pull it off so quickly?”

“I realized that all I needed to do was a little more research. That’s what it took—a little more research.”



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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE IF NOT DELIGHTED

# Human Man Gone

by Jas. R. Petrin



“I don’t know what went an’ got into that Mrs. Eastaway, accusin’ me of such a thing. Huh!”

Fran Haydon stood in the middle of the living room with the chili pot in her hand, one eye on the new twenty-eight inch television and one on her brother Tom, who was eating his dinner in his chair and mopping up the last bits of ground beef and onion on his plate with the crust of a slice of toast. Tom was a man of wheezy, flatulent sighs and borborygmic rumblings. He always ate his dinner in his chair in the living room; there were dappled stains on the velveteen arms to prove it.

Tom Haydon emitted a gaseous rumble and held out his plate. Fran scooped him out another helping. On TV the Wheel of Fortune took another clattering spin.

“Oh, lookit,” Fran said, cheering suddenly, “she’s went an’ missed the five thousand dollars—stupid! Serves her right, though, just lookit that dress.” Then her face clouded again. “That darn Mrs. E.—imagine! Walked right in the store with her fangs out an’ just flew at me. *Flew* at me. Like a bat. A vampire bat. And I ain’t the only one, neither. She’s flown at pretty near everybody else in End of Main, too. Ac-

cused every soul from Lockport all through to Riverton. Oh! That was close—almost got the Bankrupt that time. Want more toast?”

Tom Haydon sat, stolidly chewing, chewing, chewing up the last few bits of his food. He gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. Then let out another epigastric thunder.

On TV, a commercial break was announced. A message from the pharmaceutical industry warning about risks of driving under the influence of sedatives, the dangers of keeping old prescriptions around the house.

“Guess I better take an’ clean out our medicine chest someday,” Fran said, “it’s just bulgin’.”

She collected Tom’s plate. “Tea’s ready. I’ll get it. Want a chippie cookie with that? How many?”

Tom held up two fingers.

In the kitchen, Fran hustled and cleared, scraped plates and poured tea. From the depths of the cookie jar she scooped four chocolate chip cookies—“got to hurry up an’ make another batch”—and tucked them onto the saucer beside Tom’s cup; then she marched back into the living room in time to see one of the contestants win the piano. People cheered, music blared. Her brother Tom sat blank-

faced, picking his teeth with an edge of *TV Guide*.

"Oh, good. That's the red-head. An' she gets the Yuropeen vacation, too. Nice. I was hopin' for her," Fran said. She put the tea down by Tom's elbow. He reached it in, gathered up a cookie, all without taking his eyes off the screen.

"What I can't for the live-long life of me figure out," Fran went on, standing and watching the show, "is what makes the silly woman think anybody in this town'd *want* to take in her husband. She figure he's some kind of a prize? Some kind of valuable bonus? Or a asset? Or just what?" She jabbed indignantly at the screen with a thrust of her chin.

"An' there's the man went an' lost everything. An' there in the audience, that's his wife—lookit the face on it! Bet she could just kill him! But she won't, a course. Wouldn't know how. Nobody does." She smiled. "You know, when your favorite player wins, you almost feel as if you went an' won the darn prize yourself, don't you?"

Tom pressed his remote control and beeped *Star Trek* onto the screen.

"Oh, them spacemen, I just don't know," said Fran.

She turned and started for the kitchen.

"Better get at them dishes if

I'm goin' to open the store another couple hours tonight. Mrs. Dulcie'll be fierce as a Roller Derby woman if I don't. Might flip me over the ice cream freezer. She always comes round this Friday of the month for her *Fambly Circle*, an' rents herself out a mushy movie.° Almost worn the color off my *Gone with the Wind*. Or pretty near."

She washed up quickly as she could, then paused at the living room doorway before going out front to open the store. "You done any more thinkin' about what I asked you? About us gettin' that dog? No? Well, you just think on it, some more this evenin', will you? That's right."

"An' just close that door to the 'partment, would you, dear, so's we can talk an' don't disturb Tom's *Unsolved Mysteries*. You can't be in the house with him if that happens. Goes snarlin' like a bear. Growlin'. On the rampage, if that happens."

"I can't imagine your Tom on the rampage," Mrs. Dulcie said. She owned the gift shop across Burton Street, and always used the expression "your Tom," as if she'd forgotten the Haydons were brother and sister and not man and wife. She had already picked out her *Gone with the Wind* video, and her magazine, and had them protectively tucked under her hand as she

sat at the store counter for her visit. The visit was obligatory. Fran visited with all her customers; she insisted on it. "Does he rampage in that chair he's always sitting in, or does he do his rampaging out of it?"

"In it, mostly. He likes that chair. Does everything in it—almost everything. 'Specially now. Won't hardly leave it since I bought him the new big TV with the remote controller thing, 'cept to go to the little boy's room."

"He ought to be more active. You ought to make him. It don't do his heart no good sitting in there like a lump all the time."

"The TV ain't so bad," Fran said, "you can learn a lot from the TV."

"It don't do him no good. My Matthew used to jog. That's how I lost him. Jogged away one morning and never come back. At first I was afraid he might have collapsed in the street—heart attack or something. They'd have brought him back if that happened."

"Tom won't jog. Claims it'd kill him, an' I guess that's true. He ain't lazy, though. That's what he says. Just conservin' energy. Savin' himself, he says, for the Big One."

"The big one?" Mrs. Dulcie stirred sugar into the tea Fran had poured her, and knit her brows irritably. "The big one

what? You talking heart attack?"

"No, no. You know. The Big Opportunity. Tom says 'everybody always gets one Big Opportunity come an' fly into their life—he learned it on *Donahue*, or was it your *Larry King*? Only most times people don't recognize it or have the gumption to jump up an' reach it down. Says he wants to be ready for his when it gets here, all rested up, so's he can just leap straight up an' grab it. —But listen, what about that Mrs. Eastaway? What the heck's she think she's doin'?"

"When your Tom leaps, you tell me so I can make sure I'm not underneath, and I hope for his sake and yours his big opportunity don't come flying in too high, what with that sofa chair so tight round his hips. —Mrs. Eastaway? Well, I think it's maybe time someone up and just told her where the grass grows."

"You mean . . ."

"That's it. What I said. You do it. Why not? Let her know where to get off. Tell her you don't like being accused of taking in other women's husbands like stray dogs and hiding them. That's what I'd do. If it was me." She looked at Fran curiously and asked, "Think you'd be ready for your big opportunity?"

"You better believe it," Fran grunted. "I'd jump clear over a bus for it." She drank some tea. "As if anybody'd want to take in a husband like Mr. E. was, anyway. The way that man whistled? I'd rather take in a murderer. Whistled all the time. Morning to night. Prob'ly all night, too, through his nose. An' always the same tune, same tune, same damn tune, drive you wild. What was it . . . ?"

"Moon River," I think. Or was it 'Deep Purple'? I always get those two confused. The Andy Williams one. You know."

"I'd kill him. I'd kill Tom if he took to whistling. I don't think I could stand it, honest to God. I'd take an' pick up his giant TV an' drop it on him. He'd know I was mad at him then, all right. I still got thirty-two payments to make on that thing, bought it in Selkirk, free delivery."

From inside the apartment they heard a sudden pulse of music as a commercial came on; and just as suddenly the beep as Tom remote-controlled a new channel onto the screen; he'd only watch it for two or three minutes, Fran knew, then go right on back to his program as soon as the advertisements ended.

Mrs. Dulcie said:

"So what do you suppose happened to him, then? To that nice

Mr. Eastaway? I mean, if no one's taken him, in—and I'm sure you're right—then where is he? Where'd he get to? I'll bet you one thing—I'll bet you he's not here in End of Main any more."

Fran was stocking the shelves behind her. "Could be you're right. Could be he just took and run off. He might of, you know. With one of them slinky little divorcee tramps down from Gimli Marina. One of them ones in the bathing suits with the leg holes up to the armpits."

"It's winter."

"Don't matter. Those tramps'd go naked on the ice. Anyways, he could of met her in the summer, couldn't he?"

"Mr. E. would never have gone up to Gimli Marina. He's afraid of the ultra-violets. Death rays from space, he calls them. They come flying at the beaches on account of all the deodorants. He learned it on *Newton's Apple*. Told me that once."

"Well . . ." said Fran. Cans clunked at the back shelf where she was stocking. "Well . . ." Her back made a popping sound as she straightened up. "Well, nobody said he had to be *some-where*s, did they? Could be he's—well—*nowheres*."

Mrs. Dulcie was lighting a cigarette, but she sat up a little straighter on her upended milk crate by the counter when she



heard that. "What are you saying?"

"What am I sayin'? I'm sayin' that maybe you're right. That maybe whoever's got him ain't someone from around End of Main. Or even Matlock or Ponemah. Maybe he just took and got himself yanked off to a place where normal folks don't usually get themselves yanked to." She stood with her hands on the Campbell's soup tins, staring up at one corner of the ceiling, through it, beyond it, out into deep space and invisible interstellar dust clouds. "Other night they had this woman on *Unsolved Mysteries*—maybe you saw her, hair like a storm blown over?—the police had her locked up for murder, only they let her out, an' she stared into this very house through the TV screen an' swore to almighty God how the truth of it was her husband had just plain walked clear off the face of the ever-lovin' earth."

"What do you mean, 'walked off it'?"

"I mean, one minute here, next minute gone. One second solid as a sausage, next second vanished, puff! like that. Like a fart on the wind."

"He exploded?"

"'Course not. I never heard of no man explodin' before. Though the way Tom burps an' thunders sometimes, it wouldn't surprise me if one day he did

—an' knock the back wall out. No, all this husband did was to take and carry out the garbage one night. A winter night. Like this one. Gentle snow fallin' like on your Christmas cards. Didn't come back in again. She went lookin' on account of, after the garbage, he was supposed to do the dishes. Flung open the door. There was the snow, all right, like a rug. A white rug. Not a mark in it but one set of bootprints. An' what do you think? That's right. All down the yard them prints went clumpin' like two feet, an' then halfway, stopped. Just stopped, that's all. No husband at the end of 'em. No boots. Nothin'. So there you are. A human man gone splang up into the sky."

"I guess he left her the garbage."

"Nope. Took that with him. Nothin' left. Only bootprints, then gone. TV said that *she* said an' lots of *other* folks said it could only of been a flying saucer or UFO what must of zoomed down that night an' grappled him up an' took him. Someone saw a light in the sky."

Mrs. Dulcie lifted her cigarette to her lips. She looked unimpressed.

"Well. Imagine that. Flying saucers. Guess now more women'll be wanting to try and send husbands out into back yards. Loading them down with

garbage, like bait." There was a deep belch from inside the apartment; Mrs. Dulcie rolled her eyes. "You could send your Tom."

Fran laughed. "No flyin' saucer'd want my brother Tom. Not unless they got a TV inside with all his favorite shows on it. Else he wouldn't be fit to live with. They'd end up havin' to kick him out. Dump him on Mars, or someplace like that. Somebody'd look up through one of them big telescopes—kind like they got in your *Nova* all over the mountains, like giant Tupperware bowls upside-down with a gash in 'em, white?—an there he'd be, stuffin' himself with green cheese an' watchin' a Martian TV show an' hoggin' their remote controller thing."

Mrs. Dulcie let out a prim puff of smoke and looked superior. "I think green cheese is supposed to be on the moon."

"Well, whatever they got there on Mars to eat, he'd eat it, eat all of it, then leave them little Martian women t'go scurryin' an' do up the dishes."

"How do you know they're little?"

"They'd be little, next to Tom."

"I always made my Matthew do up the dishes."

"There's a trick. How?"

Mrs. Dulcie took an extra long drag on her cigarette, and when she spoke, her words rode

out on little clouds of smoke.

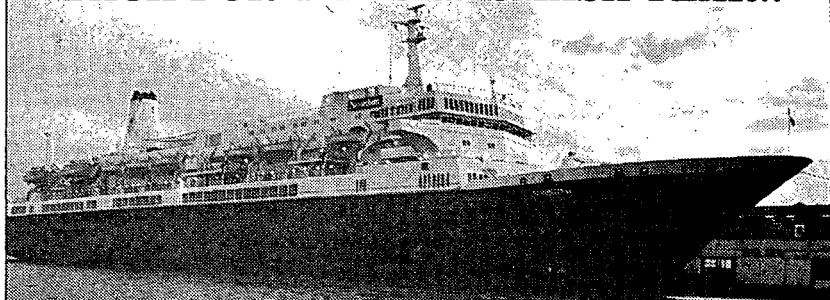
"I made him do everything. When I said 'Hop,' he'd say, 'How high?' He had to. Knew if he didn't I'd wait till about ten-eleven o'clock, then gather up all the bedsheets in the house and put 'em through the wash machine. Leave 'em there, damp and dripping. I was okay, I could sleep in my robe. Matthew didn't have no robe, just his underwear. You should have seen how mad he'd get. Just boiling. 'Specially on a work night. I used to make him get up and open the gift shop at eight."

"You couldn't make Tom do nothin' that way. He sleeps right there in his chair, sittin' up, don't even lie down, with the TV on, snorin'. An' I run the store, so he don't have no work to go to in the morning. 'Cept to make sure an' not miss his *Limbering Up with Lucy Lane*—you know, the one with the front on her that comes alive?—he says just watchin' her is exercise enough for him."

"He isn't much company for you, your Tom."

Fran shrugged. "No. But I was thinkin' I might get a dog. I'd like a dog. 'Course, Tom won't hear of a dog. He can't abide dogs. Dogs bring on his allergies, he says. Dogs give him the dry heaves." She pushed some greying hair out of her

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eyes, tugged at her ear. "Nope. Washin' a few bedsheets wouldn't help. I'd have to take an' wash his complete whole chair, an' him in it. Maybe roll him down to the car wash to do it. Tom ain't no pushover like your Matthew was."

"Pushover? Don't call him that. Took me four years to chase him out of the house, didn't it? Four years! You know," Mrs. Dulcie said with a sudden air of annoyance, "I simply can't figure out what that Mrs. Eastaway's complaining about, losing her man. Lots of women want to lose a man and can't do it. No matter what they try and do, that man turns up again. Men are like that. As if they got nine lives. Like cats."

"Use up all nine lives damn fast if one of them flying UFO's comes whooshin' down after 'em . . ." Fran gazed up at the ceiling again.

"Anyways, she ought to be glad."

"She ought to give lessons." Fran snorted, breaking out of her study.

"That's right. *How to Take and Lose a Man and Not Find Him*, by Ann Eastaway. I can see it there on the shelf at the library. With all the chapters—from 'Persuasion' right through to . . . well, let's see—to 'Poison.'"

Fran turned very grave.

"Mrs. Dulcie, you don't mean to say that, do you? You don't think—well, that Mrs. Eastaway'd—I mean, she just couldn't of took and . . . Well, could she?"

"Why not? She's never been the same since she got that new religion off the television. Her and her eternal fires. It's made her mean enough. And other mean women've done it, haven't they? And no need to go looking so wounded at me, it's not like I went and invented it or something—poison."

A sudden thoughtfulness fell over Fran. "You know, now I think of it, she always did used to tell me his whistlin' was drivin' her batty. One time she stormed in, half wild. Salted crackers, I told her. So she bought up all the salted crackers I had in the store, took 'em home. Next I seen her, I asked her how it'd done. Hadn't helped at all, she said, on account of he took an' put so much jam on 'em. An' she told me right flat out that one day she was sure God was goin' to answer her prayers an' reach down his almighty hand an' pinch off that infernal lip-music of Mr. E.'s for good."

"She said that?"

"Yep, she did. So maybe—"

"What's this about Mrs. Eastaway?" demanded Sheila Dirks, who'd just come into the store. She paused at the video rack

and plucked two movies up without hesitation, then advanced on the counter with her two new selections clasped tight in one wool-mittened hand and her two returns gripped just as tightly in the other. "And what's this about poison?"

"I got to go," said Mrs. Dulcie, who disliked Sheila Dirks and made no secret of it.

Pushing past Mrs. Dulcie, Sheila Dirks shoved her movie selections briskly across the counter. "Ring these through, will you, Fran? And put it on my charge. There's a dear."

Fran's fingers leapt to the cash register as if they knew the way, which they did, and she automatically read off the titles out loud. "*Platoon*, an' *Lethal Weapon II*. Good grief, *your* appetites are certainly startin' to develop, Mrs. Dirks. In the last few days you must of gone through every shoot 'n' punch movie in the place. Even all them Schwarzeneggers, with his violence."

"There's no accounting for taste," Mrs. Dulcie said as Sheila Dirks swept up her movies with an indignant look and strode for the door.

"An' be sure an' wind them shows back up when you're done," Fran called after her re-treating figure; she added frostily, "It ain't like *I* got no better things to do." And she dropped

Sheila Dirks's two returns into the rewind bin with a frown.

"I dunno what it is, but folks' minds surely will go to work on a thing, won't they?" Fran had already closed and locked up the store, put some cookies in the oven, and was having her tea standing up in the living room. She spoke to her brother Tom while her eyes marked the progress of a rerun of *Miami Vice*. "Mrs. Dulcie told me all sorts of people are startin' to think Mrs. Eastaway had somethin' to do with her husband's disappearance. Can you beat it? An' her such a slip of a thing. Couldn't put down a dog." She blinked at the TV. "Oh, bam!, there goes another one—what d'you suppose they do with all them TV cars they smash up? Save 'em up to drive them big-wheeled monster trucks over 'em, I guess."

She cleared her throat, spoke sweetly: "Speakin' of dogs, you done any more thinkin' on what I said? About us gettin' a dog? I thought maybe a poodle. One of them miniatures. They don't hardly shed at all, you know. Mrs. Wynn's got one, an' her uncle what lived with them had the enfaseema an' it never bothered him one bit, up till he died."

Tom said nothing. Subterra-

nean thunders muttered deep within his innards; perhaps a storm was brewing there. A commercial came on, Tom beeped it away, and suddenly they were staring into a dense Mexican jungle, following a party of scientists into a Yucatan archaeological site. "Mayans . . ." the moderator droned; "*Ritual killings . . .*"

"Maybe that's who'll find old Mr. E.," Fran said in a hollow tone, "your arkee-o-ologists. In a million years, maybe, pokin' through the ruins of End of Main, there they'll come across him, all bones an' dust, knife in his ribs . . . or bullets . . . rope round his neck, maybe . . . glass of dried-up poison gripped in his hand." She added with gathering inspiration, "I can see it, that glass. One of them free bonus tumblers from Al's Gas-O-Hol with the moose on it. Ritual killing, they'll say. Moosecult. An' make a TV show."

She fetched Tom more toast.

"Mayans," she said again, breathing, staring at the screen. "Just like aliens to us, ain't they? One show I seen, *Gold of the Gods*, said they come from Mars. What a thought." Now the narrator was leading them up an enormous pyramid. "Think of bein' flung down all them steps. Think of it—ouch! Mrs. O. fell off her back porch once an' broke her hip for six

months. Only three steps. That place there's got three hundred of 'em, easy. If Mrs. E. was a old Mayan, she could of just took an' led Mr. E. up there for a look at the stars one night, then pushed. 'Course, she ain't no old Mayan, is she? Though she does have that nose. Like a scoop. Core a melon with it. Want anything?" Tom's empty mug gleamed like a beacon.

"Tea? I'll brew you up a pot before I turn in. Not that I'll sleep. I'll be too busy wonderin' on how Mrs. E. actually *could* of done it. Got rid of Mr. E., I mean. I'll be wonderin' on that all evenin'. Funny. Won't let go of me. Like a damn puzzle."

She went into the kitchen and made Tom's tea, then brought it out to him with a plate of chippie cookies. Still warm. Fresh out of the oven with the jumbo-sized chips she knew Tom liked. On the television the scene had changed and the narrator informed them they were now in Copenhagen. He was displaying a thin, withered, leathery-looking figure that he said was the remains of an ancient human body.

"Huh, imagine that," Fran said, following the monologue. "A man murdered to death two thousand years ago—strangled. Dropped in a bog. Now *that's* got me thinking. Seems to me how Mrs. E. could of gone

about it somethin' like that —only not strangled him, couldn't strangle a canary in a head lock—an' lookit the marsh we got, thirty miles of it. Drown a Shriners' convention in it. Drown their circus an' all their elephants an' motorcycles. Remember when the Air Force took an' lost a jet in it? The marsh. Sure. That makes sense. On the other hand Mrs. E.'s religious. An' where would she go an' get poison from, anyways? *I didn't sell her none . . .*"

She turned toward the door. "Well, you just give a little more thought to that poodle dog an' we'll discuss it some more in the morning."

She said goodnight and went to bed to lie in the dark and listen to the beep of the remote control and think about dogs and alien Mayans and Danish bogs and her latest insight into the possible fate of the lost and lamented Mr. E., and the fact that Mr. Arnason was bringing her a load of bootleg fish the next day that she'd have to unload so he could have his truck back promptly the following morning.

"An' I got to clean out that medicine chest," she muttered.

**"F**ran here figures it must of been a alien got him," Mrs. Hebert announced

loudly to them all, and she had, without a doubt, more than a tolerable hint of ridicule in her voice. "Spaceman. One of them UFO's. Mrs. Dulcie told me."

The other women grouped about the counter in the store lifted their heads. It was a brainstorming session. Fran had called them to it. Cookies and free tea. Come and figure out a murder.

"I didn't say 'must of,'" Fran shot back defensively. "I only told Mrs. Dulcie that's what a woman on the TV said happened to *her* husband. That's all. Besides, there's got to be somethin' to it. She got off scot free of a murder, didn't she? The police had to take an' let her out of jail, didn't they?"

"I saw a light in a field once," Mrs. Melynchuk said.

"Fran told Mrs. Dulcie she figures he's up there on Mars right this minute, eating green cheese and watching television," Mrs. Hebert went on doggedly, as if she hadn't heard a word of Fran's defense, her voice taut with mockery.

"Mrs. H., just stop it," Fran snapped. "Stop it right now. I only said what the TV said."

"Like a lantern, only brighter," said Mrs. Melynchuk.

"I thought green cheese was on the moon," Mrs. Arbuthnot put in, murmuring in a timid, puzzled voice.



"It is. It used to be," Mrs. Hebert said. "Until Fran moved it to Mars, across the sky."

"Can't see nothing at night these days," Mrs. Melynychuk grumbled, "there's too much light."

"I remember that show," said Sue Best. "I saw it. The one about the footprints. And what I think is that lady killed the poor man herself and then got rid of his body."

"You do?" Fran said with sudden interest.

"I do. Nothing to it. Easy. She killed him and took him away and hid him some place, then came home and made those marks herself in that fresh snow."

"How'd she do that?" Fran asked, puzzled.

"Lights everywhere. Taking over," Mrs. Melynychuk said.

"Simple. I knew right away, in two minutes. All she had to do was slip on a pair of his old boots and walk halfway down the yard. Stop. Then walk backwards in her own tracks, careful, to the house. Then get rid of those boots. Burn them. I saw it done on a late night movie."

"Whew!" breathed Fran. She felt a twinge of excitement. "That could actually work, couldn't it?"

"My husband saw that program about the disappeared

man, too," said Mrs. Robideau in her polished-brass, no-nonsense, take-charge voice, "and he said there's plenty of mysterious things happen all the time that nobody can explain."

"Lights in the fields," Mrs. Melynychuk offered, "all over the world."

Mrs. Robideau forged on.

"Jet pilots have seen things. Judges. Priests. Even policemen have seen things. And not just on the TV. Right here in End of Main, too. Our police records are bulging. Weird reports. Things in the sky—"

"Things in the fields . . ." whispered Mrs. Melynychuk.

"Lights. Burn marks on the ground. Could be UFO's, my husband says. Why not? he says."

This revelation made them sit up and pay attention. Shut them all up like a public announcement. Mrs. Robideau's husband was chief of police, a serious, hard-headed, glowering big man. If he thought a thing was so, then there was no use going on speculating about it. If he thought a thing was so, then you might just as well consider that thing decided and move on to the next topic of your conversation. Which they did.

"Gettin' back to Mr. Eastaway, just supposing that it *wasn't* one of the UFO's took

him—if Mrs. E., you know, got rid of him, she would had to of overpowered him in the first place, wouldn't she?" said Mrs. Lang with her usual plodding logic. "That's what Mrs. Dulcie says. About Mr. E., I mean."

"And her so small as she is, like a doll."

"Like an *old* doll," corrected Mrs. Robideau.

"A *faded* old doll," put in Mrs. Hebert.

Fran was sitting straight up behind her counter like a chairperson, arms crossed, scratching one arm, presiding over her very *largest* teapot: "They'll drink it like camels at a pit stop," she had told Tom. At the moment she felt particularly satisfied and pleased, though she wasn't quite sure why. Was it because the traitorous Mrs. Dulcie had been put in her place by the wife of the chief of police, no less? She decided that later on she would quiz Mrs. Robideau further about police reports of UFO's over End of Main. Mrs. Lang said:

"Mrs. Dulcie explained it to me last night, about Mrs. E. bein' so tiny. She don't see how it's such a godawful problem, her small, him big. Mrs. Dulcie says you got your David an' Goliath, after all, an' Mrs. E. knows her Bible, you got to give her that."

"Good Lord, you don't mean

to say she went and slingshotted the poor man," Mrs. Robideau gasped, horrified.

"'Course she wouldn't, of slingshotted him. What Mrs. Dulcie means is, him bein' big, and her bein' small like your David there, an' knowin' all about the Bible, she'd of seen that it could be done, that's all."

The conversation subsided into silence, everyone trying to think of biblical ways in which the tiny Mrs. E. might have overpowered her tall husband, with no slingshot. No one seemed able to do it.

"Maybe he just saw a light in a field," Mrs. Melynychuk said finally, "and walked out to it."

"Stop it with your lights. She could of just tooken somethin' heavy an' just smucked 'im," replied Mrs. Obrett, who was old and small and considerably faded herself. "Just smucked 'im." She made a sudden motion in the air with one liver-spotted hand to show them how it could have been done.

Mrs. Robideau laughed.

"That's ridiculous. She couldn't reach that high. She'd had to of stood on a chair."

"She hit 'im when he was sittin'," Mrs. Obrett snapped. "From behind." And then, because she had a small reputation as a psychic, closed her eyes and squinted: "It was at breakfast . . . The TV was on . . .

He had a sausage on his fork

"She poisoned him," said Mrs. Hebert, her eyes lighting up. "That's a woman's way."

"That's right," Fran agreed, suddenly remembering. "Vincent Price said that, on *Mystery!* He ought to know." And she added: "Well, another thing then is how the heck she could of went an' got his body carted away? That's the part bothers me. I can't imagine me carryin' Tom out of the house. Even if it was on fire. An' she ain't no more a weightlifter'n I am."

Mrs. Robideau sniffed. "Well, she sure as heck didn't call no moving man up from the city. Not at *their* rates."

They moved on to deal with the logistics of the removal problem next, and despite vast quantities of tea got nowhere. And at the end of the evening, as they milled about, pulling on their coats and getting in each other's way, no one had any argument to offer Mrs. Melynchuk when she said:

"He saw a light in a field, and he went out to it."

**N**ext day, the shoppers coming into the store didn't seem to want to leave. They were all too busy talking. Gossiping about the alien invasion of End of Main. UFO's. Flying saucers

and winking cigars. Everybody had seen something, or knew of someone who had. Lights in the fields. Nobody was safe.

"Nobody's safe," said Mrs. Melynchuk, hunched like a gnome beside the Coke display.

People wanted information. By noon every video Fran had in stock concerning UFO's or star travel or invaders from space was rented out: *Alien* and *Aliens*, all the *Star Wars* movies, and of course *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Even the oldest of them were in demand: *From the Earth to the Moon*, and *War of the Worlds*; and the 1956 black and white video of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* disappeared right off Fran's shelf—someone, apparently, had stolen it!

There wasn't enough reading material in the town to satisfy interest. Books in the public library that even remotely hinted at the subject had been swept by the armload from the shelves. The place was picked clean. One woman, Mary C., apparently fond of English Lit, fought her own daughter, Sarah P., over *Wuthering Heights* until its binding came to pieces in their hands.

Only Mrs. Dulcie remained aloof from the notion that Mr. E. had been stolen away by a flash and a whirl and an object in the night. In the pulpit of her

gift shop across the street from Fran's, she hammered away at her own customers with her preferred theory of a domestic murder.

"What about you?" Mrs. Robideau asked Fran. "You used to think it was murder. Don't you still?"

"Murder is murder," Fran told her flatly. "It don't matter if it's done by a green man from space or not. An' till your husband catches up with him, an' jails him, nobody's safe." She glanced at the ceiling.

"Nobody's safe," Mrs. Melynchuk agreed.

"Could be anybody next."

"Anybody," echoed Mrs. Melynchuk. And she thumped the side of a large plastic cola bottle to emphasize the point.

"Know what they're all convinced of now, don't you?" Fran said to Tom as she set down another mug of Classic Coke and a fresh bag of taco chips on the table beside him. "They've given up on the murder by Mrs. E. idea, most of 'em, all except Mrs. Dulcie. They're all convinced Mr. E. got carried away in a UFO. The whole town thinks so. Can you beat it?—Here, lemme pick them taco crumbs up from under your feet."

She bent, grunted with the effort, straightened again.

"UFO's. Aliens. Town's thick with 'em. Everybody comes in the store says that. Everybody. I don't know how these rumors get goin'. I swear I just don't know."

She let the crumbs fall out of her hand into Tom's empty taco bag and crumpled it flat in her fist.

"'Course, not everybody buys that UFO idea. Mrs. Dulcie don't buy it. She's just too practical. She still figures the reason nobody can't locate that poor Mr. Eastaway, dead or alive, is because Mrs. Eastaway, after she went an' killed him, took an' hid him somewhere. You know—like I told you before."

With a beep, Tom changed his channel.

"An' Mrs. Dulcie may be right," Fran said. "As for Mrs. E. bein' religious, well, that don't hardly stand against her, does it? Not once you stop an' think about it. You got your eye for your eye, after all, don't you? An' your Book of Joshua with the smoting an' the smiting. An' you got your 'not suffer a witch to live,' though I guess you'd have to take an' call Mr. E. a warlock, not a witch, an' *that* don't count because he wasn't. Mrs. Obrett says he was a Odd Fellow."

They watched TV for a while. Then Fran said:

"There was some good ideas floatin' around before they all got stuck on the UFO's. Hit him over the head, is how old Mrs. Obrett figured it. Took an' drove him on out into the woods somewhere an' plumped his body under the ground. Or maybe just shoved him under the snow, she weren't decided. —Oh, lookit, there's a good show, that Columbo in his coat, I get a kick out of him—"

Beep.

"Still, I think she's misplaced the baby in sayin' that Mrs. E. must of took an' smacked poor Mr. E. That wouldn't of been her style. Not Mrs. E. What I figure—not that I *said* anything, but I couldn't help listenin', could I?—is that if she *did* up an', you know, kill him, she would of found a gentler way. An' she sure as heck wouldn't of took an' hauled him out an' buried him in no woods, not with three foot of frost into the ground. She'd of needed a drill. She'd of needed to blast him in with dynamite. An' if she only stuck him in the snow, well, then he'd come meltin' out right away, wouldn't he, once the March sun rolled around. Nope. I don't buy that. I don't buy none of it."

Tom munched his taco chips. After an interval Fran continued, frowning with thought:

"Some gentle way. Not poi-

son, though. Where would she get it?" Then, suddenly remembering that she still hadn't cleaned out the medicine chest, "Maybe she took an' drugged him down with some plain old medicine out of the bathroom cabinet. Just took an' slipped a bottle of Sominex or somethin' into his supper. She only had to put him to sleep, after all. Then somehow get him into that truck of theirs an' drive him on out to the marsh—I worked this part out last night, that poor old strangulated peat-bog man got me thinkin' about it, two thousand years before they found him. Now if she had took an' done that, she could of slipped him in easy through a ice-fishin' hole. In he'd go, neat as a seal, no splash, he never did have no shoulders on him, did he?"

With a beep, Tom found a wrestling match, settled into it, rattling his hand into the taco bag.

"Course, on the other hand, he *did* have a middle-age spread. So I guess she couldn't of used no small-type auger-hole." Fran tugged at her chin, squinting with concentration. "But your *chainsaw* type hole, kind they use for nets, well, you could pretty near slide a whale down through a hole like that, couldn't you? Slide in that man right there—" she pointed at the screen "—that Andre the Giant."

Then she shuddered. "Ouch! See that? See how he fell on that man, that furry little jabonie?—see them fat arms stickin' out? Don't it make your ribs ache?"

Beep.

"Nope, that's the one thing none of 'em could figure out—why they had to go an' side with the UFO—is how a slip of a thing like Mrs. E. could of took an' moved a body like Mr. E's. Even if he *was* only drugged. He was thin, but he weren't no Mr. Rogers. I mean, even if she were twice her size, he'd of been a weight, wouldn't he? How'd she get him out the door?"

*This Old House* was on the screen. Men scrambled like daredevils over a rooftop, stapling shingles, hammering; others were removing an old fence, uprooting a post with a winch on the back of a pickup truck.

"Is that what that thing's for?" Fran asked. "That thing like a hump on the back of Mr. Arnason's truck? I always wondered. Anyways, it reminds me—I better hurry up an' make supper, an' do up the dishes, an' then get out back an' unload them cases of fish off Mr. A's truck. Can't let 'em thaw. An' he'll be wantin' his truck back in the mornin', if he's not too blind to see after drinkin' half the night. Want anything first?"

The pickerel was no great bargain, though it was bootlegged by the Gimli fishermen under the noses of the marketing board—the fish police, Fran called them. But she always took as much of it as she could get because she felt it her duty to resist tyranny. Arnason, the Gimli trucker who brought it down to her, knew all about illegal fishing. He'd told her about the poaching that went on right here in End of Main, about the secret gill nets put through the ice out on the marsh. As she shifted the heavy cartons of frozen fish off the truck and strong-armed them into the freezer, her thoughts flitted between this and the problem of the missing Mr. Eastaway.

How *could* a small woman the size of Mrs. E. have moved a lanky and awkward and heavy man's body the way she'd of had to?

She paused<sup>2</sup> to catch her breath. Leaned against the bumper of the truck and draped her arm over the steel casing of the thing mounted there, the thing like a hump. The winch. She studied it more closely. It seemed simple enough: an electric motor with a switch; steel cable coiled tight on a drum. The post-hole scene from *This Old House* flashed back into her mind: those builders certainly got things done; they knew what

a winch was for, and how to put it to use.

Fran narrowed her eyes, leaned down, stroked the cool steel sides of the device, patted it.

She'd never taken a close look at a winch before. Lots of folks in End of Main had the things, had them stuck on their bumpers like ornaments. Most seemed to cart them around just for the heck of it.

Even the Eastaway truck had one . . .

"Huh!" she said abruptly to the cases of fish, suddenly quite taken aback by herself. "Well! TV. Ain't it somethin'? The things you learn." She began to smile, a flush of understanding slowly spreading and warming her face. "Well, that's got to be it, don't it? An' I never would of guessed it, neither. More fool me."

Fran washed the fish smell off her fingers and wiped her hands on a teatowel. *Columbo* had been restored to the TV—she could hear Peter Falk's voice drift in through the kitchen door. As soon as she stepped into the living room, Tom beeped *This Old House* back onto the screen.

Fran said absently:

"Mrs. Lang—Lang the butcher's mother, not Lang the teacher—well, she goes with

the UFO's, not the murder by Mrs. E., no faith in nothin', as usual, sayin' the whole thing's impossible on account of Mrs. E. bein' such a cutlet an' him such a side of beef. But size, that don't mean nothin', does it? Not in this day an' age. Not with what you call your technology."

The workers were shown driving a truckload of old fence posts away.

"You listenin' to me, Tom?"

Tom wheezed.

"I wish you'd listen to me more close. One of these days I'll tell you somethin' important, an' you'll miss it."

Tom burped.

"With that hump thing they got, that winch, she could of dragged Mr. E.'s body clean out the door of the house. Down the steps. Hauled him up a plank into the bed of their truck, easy, by the ankles. Then she could of drove to the marsh—that track out towards Chesley's where nobody hardly goes but the fishermen—plenty of chain-saw holes there, like Mr. Ar-nason told me, for to put illegal nets through, an' no one see."

Fran sighed out loud. "Whew! Guess I've figured out everythin' now. A whole murder. What a relief. Glad I did it. Couldn't of gotten to sleep otherwise."

She pointed past Tom. "There!



Look! Back up one . . . two channels . . ." Beep-beep.

"Lookit that. Figure skates. Don't you just love 'em? I could watch 'em by the hour. So graceful. Even them men, you'd think they'd got wings—"

Beep-beep-beep-beep.

Fran took a deep breath.

"There's somethin' else. You know Mrs. Robideau. Well, she says her husband *believes* in flying saucers—what they call your UFO's. An' him the chief of police. Ain't that interestin'? I can't get that out of my head. The chief of police. Imagine it. Can't get *lots* of things out of my head these days."

She threw out her elbows and stretched. "Well, there's your *EastEnders* just startin'. In the laundermat again. I swear they live in that laundermat. Each one in a dryer. Poppin' out in the mornin' like prairie dogs." She pulled back the curtain and glanced out at the street. "That snow. Off an' on again, like a switch. This winter ever goin' to end?"

Then she turned and said with an air of resolution, "Think I'll stay up a bit an' just take an' get at that medicine cabinet. See what all's there. Then I'll make you up some hot chocolate. Just the way you like it, with a little somethin' in it. Finished them tacos? Want anything?"

When Mrs. Dulcie banged in the next day to get her usual two loaves of day-old bread that was half price, and some frozen TV dinners, and drop off her *Gone with the Wind*, she looked a bit dazed. Her face was flushed and mottled, her lips thin and white.

Fran heaved herself up off her knees where she was dusting shelves at the back of the store, shook out her damp cloth, and went to her seat behind the counter and sat down.

"So," she said, "what's the matter with you?" Then she added, putting a bit of an edge on her voice: "Look like you just met a alien yourself." There was a thick blanket of wet snow on the ground outside, and she waited and watched while Mrs. Dulcie stamped it off the toes of her boots.

"I feel like maybe I did just have one of those close encounters," Mrs. Dulcie muttered, "but I don't know what kind—first, second, third, whatever's the worst. Guess I'm still a little off balance."

Mrs. Dulcie automatically picked up her bread and her TV dinners, and plumped herself down on a milk box.

"What happened to you?" Fran asked.

"What didn't happen to me? Everything's happened to me."

Mrs. Dulcie's cheeks were

ashen and sunken, her lower lip was trembling a little. She took the cup of tea Fran offered her, held it unsteadily for a moment, then took a drink from it. The cup and saucer rattled. She said over the brim, "It was that Mrs. Eastaway."

"Her again!" Fran snorted. "Now what? Who'd she murder this time?"

"She came into the gift shop first thing this morning."

"So?"

Mrs. Dulcie took another gulp of tea.

"Let me back up. That's wrong. I got it wrong. She didn't just *come* in, she more like *whooshed* in. The door flew back and she *whooshed* in. Just like a cyclone!"

"What'd she say?"

"*'YOU!'*"

Fran raised her eyebrows, rocked back an inch and touched her breast. "What? Me?"

"No. Not YOU as in you—I mean YOU as in *me*."

"Thank goodness."

"She was a full two inches off the floor. You should of seen her—just hovering. You could of took and flown her up the chimney. And mad? Slammed the door so hard I thought the glass had exploded and shot clear across the floor. Of course I tried to calm her down. 'You okay, there, Mrs. E.?' I says. 'You look like death on a plate.'

"'You!' she hollers again, like it's the only word she knows. And you've got to just picture her with her scrawny arm thrown out and her scrawny finger pointing. 'You!' And all the time her throat is making these little swallowing motions like maybe her breakfast got stuck."

"And then she starts advancing on me, her arm pointing like one of them underwater guns on *Ocean Alive*, with a wound-up spear in it, ready to shoot."

"Were you scared?"

"Scared? I was wishing I still had that old hockey stick that Matthew used to keep under the counter for burglars, only I gave it to that Adam James what's-his-name—you know, whose dad writes them awful stories—when the boys wouldn't let him play. 'Me?' I says. 'What about me, Mrs. Eastaway?' I says."

"She was wild-eyed. You can't picture her. Like a bat in a bug-house. And next thing I know she's at the counter and half-ways across it with that nose of hers stuck in my face—the *powder* that woman wears. I crowded so far back I could feel the souvenir thimbles on the peg board behind me digging into my shoulders. I never saw a woman so wild before. Her face all red and pinched, and bags under

her eyes you could of packed a school picnic in."

Here Mrs. Dulcie had to pause and drink some more tea and dab at her face for a minute with Fran's dustcloth.

"Go on," Fran said, encouragingly.

"It's you!" she snarls—like something gone wild. 'You and this . . . this *place*,' she says. 'Do you know what this shop of yours is?' she says. 'Well, do you? A place of *mendacity*.' That's the word she used. 'A place of *calumny*.' She said that, too. 'It won't escape the fury of the Lord,' she says, 'and neither will you. You'll be smote by his right hand,' she says. 'Smote, I say!' And then she takes in my shop with a sweep of her hand like a semaphore, or a sophomore, or something, and knocks a nine dollar mustache cup clean off the shelf.

"I couldn't think what to do. 'I don't know what you mean, I've got no calumny,' I says, and the whole time I'm wondering if my screams'll be heard out in the street when she starts in to murder me.

"'You know what I mean,' she says; then loud as a train horn, 'YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!' And she begins prowling up and down the aisles, her voice rising and falling, rising and falling, and breaking into sobs.

"'It's a fine thing,' she says, 'when a woman gets mistreated in her own town. I could have gone off to live in Minneapolis with the brothers and sisters if I'd wanted to. They asked me, invited me after my Werner ran off when I sold the TV. They said for me to come down and lean on them and help out in the ministry. But no—I stayed. And for what? FOR WHAT? For ABUSE, that's what. And MISTREATMENT. And . . . and LIES!'"

"'Lies?' I says. 'Someone telling lies about you, Mrs. E.?"

"She screamed so loud she almost blew me out the window.

"'YOU'VE BEEN TELLING LIES ABOUT ME!'"

"Well, I was shocked, Fran. Shocked. You could have took and rolled me out the door."

"What'd she do then?" Fran asked.

"Started sobbing again and collapsed right there in the aisle with her head in the Indian Korean beaded tomahawks and her feet in the Blue Mountain pottery. I went round the counter to her, mortified. Had visions of the whole town walking in and finding a Shopper's Delite customer laid out in the aisles like I'd killed her.

"Well, it was awful, just awful, you can't imagine, her lying there like a sack and screaming

the daylights down, and sobbing, and drumming her heels, and waving her little arms in the air like windmills. I could have died on the spot."

"An' what *did* you do?"

"Calmed her down, didn't I? Had to. Patted her and brushed the hair out of her tears till she stopped kicking.

"I could have shoved her out, then. She was calm. But I knew there was a wind off the marsh would freeze the tears on her face. And I wanted to explain how wide of the target she was. And so I says, 'You got to understand, Mrs. E.' I says, 'you just got to, that people come into this shop each day and blather about everything from communists to Q-tips, and keep their ears open. And the same thing happens across the street at Fran's. And what folks blab and carry away with them an' spread around the town, well, there's no way I can stop that, no more than the influenza.'

"'You could try,' she says right back at me, quieter now but still ready to fight.

"'Well, I could try and do lots of things, couldn't I, dear?' I says. 'I could try and jump over the channel, only I'd drown.'

"'You could have rules,' she says.

"'I've got rules. Lots of 'em. Rules against smoking, rules against shoplifting, and I can't

even enforce *them*,' I says. 'Especially that Liz Cody. I'm going to have a deep look into *her* bag one of these days.'

Here Mrs. Dulcie cocked her head.

"Your TV broke, or something, Fran? I don't hear that remote control beeper."

Fran shook her head, and Mrs. Dulcie continued:

"'Put a sign up,' Mrs. E. goes on, like a dog won't let go of a rag. 'Put up a sign says No Gossip. You could get Fran's Tom to do it.'

"'Dear,' I says, 'I couldn't get Fran's Tom to cross the street, not if I had the devil himself here shopping for lighter fluid.'

"I helped her up, sat her down on my stool behind the counter, and all the time she's leaking all down her face, and moaning, 'I never killed my Werner,' and crying all over my smock like a baby. And that's when she told me."

"Huh? Told you what?"

"Told me what happened to Mr. E."

Fran held her breath. "Confessed to his murder?"

"No. Told me how she'd found out that he'd run off and moved in with that awful Sheila Dirks."

Fran gaped, astonished.

"Sheila Dirks? Not Sheila Dirks!"

"That's what she told me—Sheila Dirks. Sheila kicked him

out, finally, on account of his whistling."

Fran rose, tottered forward, stood and gazed out through the backwards *Pizza-Pop* lettering on the window, then began slowly shaking her head from side to side. "No wonder she suddenly started rentin' out all them Kung-fu an' explosion shows. All them Schwarzenegers. I see it clear now. It must of begun when Mrs. E. stopped the Cablevision, after they put her preacher in jail, that nice man with the teeth. I guess after that Mr. E. was like a kid kept from the candy jar. An' then when she went an' had the TV carted off completely, well, I guess somethin' in him must of just snapped. Broke down like a video addict. Run off to find himself a TV overdose. Do anything for it. Move in with Sheila Dirks."

"No way to solve a problem," Mrs. Dulcie said.

"Nope, it surely isn't."

"I just hope we've learned something from all this."

"We have," Fran mumbled. "I have. I learned a lot."

"We don't have a murderer in the town, after all."

"Yes," Fran said, "murderer. —I mean, no."

The two women remained for a while without speaking. Fran went back to her stool and sat down and spread her elbows

wide on the scrubbed, polished surface of the counter top. She lifted her cup of cold tea to her lips, took one sip, then lowered the cup to the counter again.

"At least there's one good thing about it," Mrs. Dulcie said. "Folks are going to stop carrying on about this UFO foolishness. They won't be so ready to believe stories about aliens, now."

Fran turned a little lighter in the cheeks. She blinked. She said soberly, "Well. Well, I suppose that's true, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. Especially that damn Mr. Robideau and all his talk. And him the chief of police. He won't dare breathe a word about aliens now."

"I suppose he won't."

"Darn right, he won't."

Fran looked up at the ceiling, her favorite spot, through it and off into deep space and fleeting interstellar gases. She wavered a little on her stool.

Mrs. Dulcie tilted her head to one side, glanced toward the apartment. "That's funny."

"What is?"

"I still haven't heard anything out of your Tom."

Fran stared back blankly. "You haven't?"

"No. Not none of his usual beep-beeping."

"Maybe . . ." Fran said dully, "maybe he went somewheres . . ."

"Your Tom? Don't make me laugh. Where on earth would he go? Your Tom never goes anywhere." She suddenly looked at Fran with alarm on her face. "Hadn't you better go check on him?"

Fran shrugged. "Maybe," she offered, "he just went for a minute to take the garbage out."

"What? Your Tom take the garbage out? I can't believe it."

"You can't?"

"No, I can't. Nobody else would, either."

Fran gazed back at her. There seemed to be nothing more she wanted to say.

Mrs. Dulcie set her jaw with determination, stood up, and stalked to the apartment door. "We can't just *sit* here. We've got to go and see."

The apartment was quiet. The TV was off. Tom's huge chair was empty. Except for a fuzzy white face with a little black nose that peered around the arm of the chair and yawned at her.

"Hey. You went and got that poodle," Mrs. Dulcie said. "Mrs. Wynn bring it? I heard she got a cat named Quiche, or Kweesh,

or some damn thing." She went into the kitchen. "Tom," Mrs. Dulcie called. "Where are you, Tom?" She went into the kitchen. She looked out the window. Then she called out, "Fran, you better come see. It looks like there's footprints out there in the snow. They go down along the yard, and then . . . Oh, my . . . Oh, *my!*"

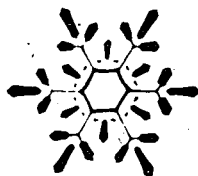
Mrs. Dulcie turned slowly from the window and looked back into the apartment with an awful expression of shock on her face. Fran had come in from the store, settled herself comfortably in Tom's enormous chair, taken the poodle onto her lap, and picked up the TV remote controller. And when she spoke she didn't seem to be speaking to Mrs. Dulcie, or to the poodle, or to anyone else at all.

She said to nobody in particular:

"I bought this chair an' I never even sat once in it in my whole life. Ain't that strange?" She beeped the TV on. "I suppose we got a little time yet. Just what channel is that Columbo on, in his coat?"



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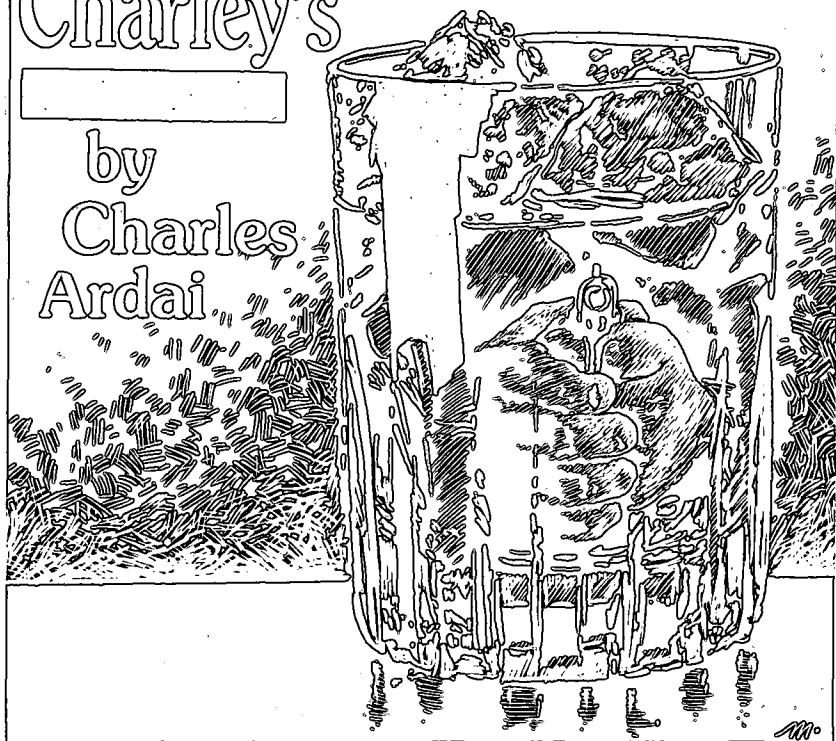
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YNSH-2



# A Bar Called Charley's

by  
Charles  
Ardai



Marty Jensen spent as little time as he could on the road. Unfortunately, this was still a great deal—there was only so much traveling that a traveling salesman could avoid. He'd been at it on and off for fifty years; and though his fellow drummers had, years earlier, trans-

ferred off the beat for the kinder pastures of retirement Marty was still at it, paving America's roads with his shoe leather.

It was a dead-end job, an exhausting job, a dinosaur-stuck-in-amber of a job. No one went door to door in the nineties, for crying out loud! That's why you had fax machines and the Home

Shopping Network! But it was *his* job, and that was all there was to it. Hilda could try to talk Marty out of it, the children could, but it was like trying to talk a falling man out of hitting the ground: if he could, he would—it just wasn't in his hands.

Marty thought, sometimes, as he drove along the endless intestinal highways that connected this county and that township and the other district, about the people he'd known in the business. Hell, back in the fifties he'd shared more than one berth with the great man himself, Louie DelBianco; that was before the DelBianco chains started sprouting up around the country like pimples on a teenager's face, of course. These days Louie was fat and wealthy—you could see him on television commercials almost every night. There was nothing left of the lanky, hungry kid Marty had gotten run out of towns with in the old days.

And there were so many others, faces Marty remembered the way some people remember the faces in their high school yearbooks. They weren't all successes on the order of Louie DelBianco, of course—plenty of guys had dropped off the circuit just for office jobs with solid pay and an address that didn't change from day to day. If the work wasn't too interesting, at least they got to do it from nine

to five only a couple of minutes away from home; that was enough of a siren song to lure them in.

There were also a lot of men who had saved up a stake during their years on the road so that at age fifty they could pop off to Florida or Arizona and lie around all day reading *Reader's Digest*. Mack Davis was the one Marty always thought about, though Mack was a special case. He'd never known how to have a good time as a young man—always sat in his hotel room rather than go with the others for a night of drinking and catting—and they'd laughed at him for it until, at age *thirty*, Mack had thumbed his nose at the lot of them and packed it in. What nobody had realized was that he'd been saving every penny he got; before anyone knew what he was up to, he'd cashed in for a big house in South Dakota with enough of a farm attached to support him in style.

For all Marty knew, Mack was still at that house, having wisely gotten out of the game while "arthritis" and "backache" were still old men's words and "old men" meant nobody you knew.

Of course, there were also fellows who hadn't been fortunate at all, the ones who'd gotten drunk and fallen asleep on the railroad tracks or who hadn't

been able to take the grind and had left an innocent hotel manager with a corpse and a bloody mattress to get rid of. Marty was certainly grateful to have escaped such grisly fates. But even here he felt a perverse envy—like Mack, these men had gotten out of the game young. “Rest in Peace” had a certain appeal for a traveling salesman.

Mostly, however, Marty regretted never having done anything else, never even having *tried* to do anything else. From seventeen on he’d been mapping the continent, mile by mile and step by aching step. Somewhere in there he’d taken a few years off to get married and have kids, but door-to-door was his life. And sometimes late at night, when his headlights could only hold the darkness outside his car a few feet away, Marty would start thinking about his life, and about what he was doing five hundred miles from home with a trunk full of sample bags at his age; then he’d start feeling sorry for himself; and when that happened, he’d start thinking about how easy it would be to find a nice cliff or a bridge and to drive over the edge without even consciously deciding to.

At times like this, part of Marty reminded him that he had a responsibility to Hilda and the children; another part

of him reminded him that the children were old enough to take care of themselves and that, anyway, his first responsibility was to himself. And then the first part of him pulled the car in at the next inn or bar or hotel they passed because it knew that if it waited too long, the second part would start to sound awfully convincing.

One night, Marty pulled in at a bar called Charley’s.

**T**here was one other car in the lot and one other customer in the bar. A radio was playing on the counter, tuned to a local blues station. The music crackled with static and set a tone that matched Marty’s mood. The other man was young, maybe thirty-five, and bent over a beer; the bartender was a stocky old guy who looked like he’d live to be a hundred and five and go out fighting.

Marty climbed up on a stool and ordered a Jack Daniels straight. When he’d drunk it and had started to feel a little light, he ordered a Heineken, which he sipped slowly. No point in getting drunk to get over feeling suicidal—you’d just end up driving off a cliff anyway.

“Hey, Charley!” the young guy shouted. “Get me another beer, okay?” The bartender took his time getting to the other side of the bar, fishing another

Rolling Rock out of the refrigerator chest, and popping off the top with an opener hanging on the wall. "Jesus," the young guy said. "Can you do it any slower?"

Charley didn't say anything; just took the guy's money and came back with change.

The guy got up from his stool and moved over to Marty's. He looked to Marty like someone who was dying to talk and who would talk to the walls if he couldn't get another person to listen. Marty had seen that in drummers from time to time, especially during the war. Hell, he'd talked to his share of walls himself. For that reason and no other he shook the guy's hand when it was offered and introduced himself.

"Ted Kimball," the young guy said. "So, Marty, what d'you do?"

This guy couldn't care less what I do, Marty thought. So he shrugged and stared down into his beer.

"Me," Ted said, "I'm a hit man. I kill people. For money."

Sure, Marty thought. That's five beers talking. Six and he'd have been president of the United States. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yeah." Ted clapped an arm over Marty's shoulders. He aimed an index finger at Marty's temple. "Bang bang."

Marty would have gotten angry, but he couldn't. This was

a bar, and bars were for telling stories. People didn't go to bars to drink; they went to keep themselves from going someplace else. Like over the edge. So Marty was used to the routine: salesmen talking up scores they'd never made, strutting cocks air-sculpting women out of their dreams, young men telling the world what they were going to be and old men telling the world what they never were. Ted Kimball, Marty told himself, who's maybe a married plumber in real life, pours enough alcohol into his veins that he becomes a ruthless killer for hire. Nobody tells him what to do, or *bang bang!* Marty shook his head.

"You don't believe me," Ted said.

Two thoughts ran into each other head-on in Marty's mind. *Never contradict a drunk, and Never let a drunk think you don't believe him.* "Listen," Marty said, "if you say you're a hit man, you're a hit man."

Ted nodded. He had expected a confrontation that hadn't come, maybe one he'd wanted to come. "Yeah. That's what I am." He paused. "Look." He reached into his windbreaker and pulled a pistol out of his inside breast pocket. He held it out to Marty but pulled it back when Marty reached for it. "My gun," he said. He held it up to the light. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Marty nodded. Never contradict a drunk. Ted slipped the gun back into his pocket and returned to the stool.

"So what'd you say you do?" he asked.

"I'm in sales," Marty said.

Ted nodded. "I have a brother in sales. He's with Unitech. It's this company in California. You heard of it?"

Never in my life, Marty said to himself. He nodded. "Yeah, it sounds familiar."

"Sales." Ted smiled. "Hey, you want to hear a joke?"

"Sure," Marty said.

"Okay," Ted said. "There's this traveling salesman who comes to town on a Saturday night—"

Charley put the glass he was wiping down on the counter. It rang sharply against the wood. He reached over to the radio and turned the volume all the way down. Ted fell silent.

"I don't want to hear it," Charley said.

"Hey, what's your problem?" Ted said.

"It's a rule. Tell another joke."

"What's a rule?"

"Tell another joke."

"What do you mean it's a rule?" Ted insisted.

Charley leaned on the bar. "No credit. No pissing on the bathroom floor. No traveling salesman jokes. Those are the rules. You don't like them, you can leave."

"Why no salesman jokes?" Marty asked.

Charley turned to him. "*It's a rule*. Listen, this is my place. I don't care what goes on anywhere else, but in here I'm not going to have anyone making fun of salesmen. Understand?"

"Mister," Marty said, "I'm the last one to make fun. I'm a traveling salesman myself."

"Save it," Charley said.

"No, I'm serious," Marty said, realizing that the bartender believed him as much as he had believed Ted. "You can look in my car. I've got all my samples. I've been doing this since '42. I started on the Langdon Circuit." He desperately tried to think of something that would prove his story, half aware that he was being as silly as Ted had been when he had pulled his gun. But this was all part of bar life, too, an adult version of show-and-tell. One guy shows his gun, the other shows his samples, and everyone sucks on his bottle.

"Hold on," Ted said. It was obviously just sinking in that he hadn't managed to tell his joke. "Do you mean to tell me I can't say anything I want in here?"

"You can say anything you want," Charley said. "Just nothing that I find personally offensive. When you make cracks about salesmen, you're insulting me."

"You used to be a salesman?" Marty asked.

"Yes. I used to be a salesman. Happy?"

Must've been like Mack Davis, Marty thought, only he bought a bar instead of a farm. If I'd been smart, I'd have done the same thing. "No kidding. I'm surprised we never ran into each other in all these years."

"I got out of it thirty years ago," Charley said.

"Even so." Marty stretched out a hand. "I'm Marty Jensen."

Charley reluctantly shook Marty's hand. "Charley DelBianco."

"DelBianco?"

"Yes. Like the department stores."

"You related to Louie?" Marty asked. "I used to work the coast with Louie DelBianco."

Charley arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? He's my son."

Ted shook his head in tipsy wonder. "You're Louie DelBianco's father? You never told me that, Charley. That's like being Tom Carvel's father. That's like being Donald Trump's father."

"I can't believe it," Marty said. "It's really something meeting you like this. I haven't seen Lou in years. Back in '53 we did the Dakota Strip together—I was selling carpets and he was selling vacuum cleaners. Told the customers he was my kid brother." Marty

laughed. "You look where he is now, you'd never know he started out ringing doorbells and carrying a bag of demo dust."

"It's how I started, too," Charley said. "You're serious, you're still doing it?" Marty nodded. "You poor bastard. You must be almost my age."

"I don't think so," Marty said. "How old are you?"

"Seventy-four."

"I'm only sixty-seven," Marty said. "Don't make me older than I am."

Charley pointed at Ted, who was trying to sift the conversation through a brain softened by an evening's drinking. "To him, it might as well be the same age."

"To him," Marty said, "it's beyond age. To him, we're something he'll never be, and that's *old*."

"Hold on a minute," Ted said.

"We're just teasing you," Charley said. "Sit down."

"You know," Marty said, "I'm surprised Louie never told me his old man was a drummer. We were pretty close back then."

"You kidding? Lou was ashamed of me." Charley's voice fell a little. "Around the time he was starting out, I was still on the circuit. We overlapped for a good six years. How would you feel if you were a kid trying to make a name for yourself and your father was still carrying

carpetbags on the road somewhere? How would you feel if every time the door to your train car opened it might be your father coming through? Or how about if every time you hit a cathouse with the guys you thought, maybe the old man's doing the same thing right now in the next county—or in the next room?

"Look, you can't blame him. He was right. It happened once just like that: I was coming out of a room and he was going in. And he saw me, there was nothing I could do about it." Charley shook his head, remembering.

Anyone else would have asked, *Why didn't you stop, if you knew it was hurting him? Why didn't you just stop selling?* Marty didn't need to.

"We were both ashamed of ourselves. And we both got out of it as fast as we could. I bought this place off a widow and Louie . . . well, you know what Louie did."

"You ever hear from him?" Marty asked.

Charley shrugged. "Every few months he sends a check. I've got them in a stack at home. Never used them. Except one, to put up his mother's headstone. I figured he could kick in for that."

Outside, a pickup rolled in, crunching the lot's gravel. The ignition cut off, a door opened, a door slammed.

Charley shook himself, wiped his forearm across his brow, and stepped back. "So that's why no salesman jokes." He addressed himself to Ted. "Understand?" Ted nodded. "Good." Charley replaced Marty's beer with a fresh one. "On me," he said.

The door to the bar opened. Two men came in, their leather jackets slick and dripping. Marty hadn't realized that it was raining. The men stepped up to the bar. One lit a cigarette and took hungry drags on it while the other ordered.

"Two Buds, and a glass of water for my friend." He was a thin man, younger than Ted, with something of the college dropout about him: his hair was shoulder-length and ragged at the ends and his patchy two-day beard covered deep acne scars, none of which had the rain made any more attractive. Maybe, Marty thought, this is what college *students* look like these days. Charley brought them their drinks.

"Do you have any sandwiches?" the friend asked. He was heavier and a little more handsome than his companion, but they shared the same ragged hair and haggard complexion.

Charlie looked in the larder by the ice chest. "Ham and cheese."

"Okay, give me one of those."



Charley took out a sandwich on a paper plate and popped it in the microwave. A minute later, he took the sandwich out and put it on the bar along with a plastic ashtray.

"Thanks." The man stubbed his cigarette out and looked at his friend, who was taking a long pull from his beer. "Rick."

Rick tipped the bottle down. "Yeah?"

"Want a bite?"

"No, you eat it, David. But hurry up. We've still got to make Newton before dawn."

David had already wolfed down half the sandwich. He nodded before starting on the other half.

"Hey." Ted stood up. "You guys want to hear a joke?" He turned to Charley. "Don't worry," he said with a drunk's precision, picking out each word with his index fingers, "it's Not About Salesmen." He turned back to David and Rick. "Charley used to be a salesman, guys, so it's one of the rules."

David finished the sandwich and wiped his hands on a paper napkin. He looked over at Rick.

"What do we owe you?" Rick asked Charley.

"There's this guy who comes to town," Ted said. "He's *not* a salesman." He finished off his beer. "*Not* a salesman."

Charley did some tallying in his head. "Eight dollars even."

"You want to get this or should

I?" David said.

"No, I'll spot you," Rick said. He stood up and reached into his jacket pocket.

"Okay," Ted said, "he sells things." He laughed to himself. "But he's not a *salesman*."

Rick pulled a gun out of his pocket. Ted didn't see it. Charley did.

"So he goes up to the post office," Ted said.

"Ted," Charley said. He pointed to the gun.

Ted looked and then looked away. The blood drained from his face. "Oh, God."

Marty tried to look away but he couldn't. He sat on his stool and stared at the gun. It was tiny, smaller than Rick's hand, but it looked real—

It looked real. What the hell did he know? He didn't know anything about guns. He'd never owned one; he'd never even held one. Some drummers he'd known had bought pistols, "for protection," but Marty had decided early on to avoid temptation. The ones who bought guns were usually the ones who left notes to their families written on hotel stationery.

Or who ended up in jail after shooting someone, more often than not in a bar.

"All right, gentlemen," Rick said. He spoke slowly, shaping each word carefully. Marty didn't feel this was a good sign. It made him sound scared. "This

is going to work like clockwork and nobody is going to get hurt. You—" he pointed the gun at Charley and Marty could see that his hand was shaking—"give me all the cash you've got." Charley started toward the register. "Move!"

Charley got to the register as quickly as he could and rang up "No Sale." He started to take the money out, but David walked around the bar and pushed him aside.

"Move away," Rick told him, "and put your hands over your head. You too." He waved the gun at Marty and Ted, then stepped back a few feet to cover all three of them.

Marty and Charley put their hands up. After a second, Ted did, too.

David slammed the cash drawer shut and went around to the other side of the bar. He held up a handful of cash as he did so. It didn't look like much to Marty—maybe two hundred dollars, maybe not even that. In the corner of his vision Marty could see Ted shaking on his stool. Then he realized that he was shaking, too.

"Okay," Rick said. "Good." He took the money from David, then he stared closely in each man's eyes. He either found or didn't find what he was looking for, and the muscles in his face relaxed a little. "Now I want you each to take off your watch

and give it to David along with any money you've got."

David stepped up to Charley, who unbuckled his watch and held it out. "It's yours, take it," he said. "I don't have a wallet. I swear to God." David took the watch.

Marty saw Rick aim the gun at him. It was his turn. He took his hands off his head and pulled up his sleeves. "I don't wear a watch," he said. It was the truth—he hadn't for years. The clock in the car was plenty, not to mention all the clocks you passed on the road; and in any case over the years he'd developed the ability to guess the time of day fairly accurately just by looking around him. He hoped this skill wouldn't get him killed tonight.

For a moment he thought it might. Rick's eyes tightened up and Marty half expected his trigger finger to do the same. But what could Marty do? He was showing them both wrists. Where else could he wear a watch?

After a second, Rick spoke. "Then give him your wallet."

Marty let out the breath he was holding. He stood up and pulled his wallet out of his pants pocket, handing it to David almost gratefully.

The gun turned once more. Ted got off his stool. He looked as if he was in shock: his skin was a sallow, sweaty white and

his legs were trembling so much that Marty was surprised he could stand up.

"Your watch," Rick said. "Hurry up."

Ted fumbled at his wrist until he got his watch off. It looked like a cheap digital. David snatched it and crammed it in a pocket.

"Your wallet."

"My wallet . . ." Ted said. He patted his pants pockets, his eyes darting nervously, then the pockets of his windbreaker.

Oh my God, Marty thought. No, God, don't do it, you idiot, please don't do it—

"My wallet . . ." He reached into his windbreaker.

*No, you stupid fool, they were practically out of here—*

Ted groped in his pocket, trying to get his fingers around his gun.

"Just take it," Rick said.

David moved in closer to him.

Charley gasped. Marty knew he had just realized what was going to happen.

Rick swung his gun to face Charley.

Ted got his gun out of his pocket.

And fired.

He was too drunk and scared to hit anything he aimed at, but David was right in front of him and he didn't have to aim. He just stuck the barrel in David's stomach and pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through him,

spraying blood and a good deal that wasn't blood across the floor.

Rick spun, catching the spray on his legs. David fell backwards, clutching his belly. Rick and Ted pointed their guns at each other over his body.

Ted couldn't have pulled the trigger again if he had wanted to and Rick couldn't not have. Marty watched Ted fall as three bullets tore into his chest.

Rick and Charley ran over to the bodies. David was still alive and groaning, his hands clamped uselessly over his wound. Ted, on the other hand, was clearly dead; Charley backed away from the corpse.

"You son of a bitch!" Rick screamed. Charley had his hands out in front of him, and he was shaking his head. Rick stood up and took aim.

"I didn't do anything!" Charley said.

Rick shot him. Then he turned to face Marty.

Marty sank to his knees. He realized with half a mind that he had his hands clamped on top of his head, but his arms were locked and he couldn't do anything about it. He looked in Rick's face and saw hatred and confusion and stark terror.

"Please," he said, the words spilling out of his mouth and out of his control, "I'm a traveling salesman, I never saw you, in ten minutes I'm out of

this town and I was never here. I don't care who you are, I don't want to know, please, I just don't want to die—"

Rick pushed the gun into Marty's throat. "You don't want to die?" he shouted.

"I don't want to die."

Rick pulled the trigger. Halfway. The moment hung, drawn out, and Marty felt as though he was flying through the air between two trapezes. He was falling; there was no net, and he wanted strong arms to reach down and grab him and never let go. "I don't want to die," he whispered, sobbing, "I don't want to die."

A lifetime passed while the metal trembled at Marty's throat. The silence was hideous; David's moans, when they came, were worse. Marty was suffocating in a groaning, choking cloud of death, he was sinking out of life like a man in quicksand with nothing to grab onto. "Please," he begged.

Rick released the trigger and lowered the gun. Marty sank to the floor in a heap.

"Get up," Rick said. "You're going to help me get him to the truck." He pointed to David. "Then you're going to get the hell out of here. And you're never going to come back."

Marty pulled himself to his knees. "Yes. I never saw you," he whispered. "Thank you."

He crawled over to David's body and lifted the legs. Rick jammed his gun into his pocket and lifted David under the arms. They backed out of the bar and into a heavy drizzle. As gently as they could, they laid David down in the bed of the truck and covered him to the shoulders with a tarpaulin. Water spilled onto his face and streamed off, and it appeared to comfort him since he wasn't groaning any more.

Marty could tell that David was already dead but he didn't say a word.

Somehow, Marty managed to get his car keys out of his pocket and into the door of his car. Rick waited until Marty was behind the wheel and then he jumped into the truck and drove off. A few seconds later, the truck disappeared around a curve in the road.

Marty opened his door again and threw up.

Then he rested his head against the steering wheel and cried until dawn, shivering in the cold rain and his ruined suit. As soon as it was light, and his arms and legs had stopped shaking, he drove away. The shortest route he knew was four miles.

It took him three minutes before he saw the "You Are Now Leaving Mineraska County" sign in his rear view mirror.

The sun was bright and warm, the way it gets only after a summer-night storm. Puddles on the highway steamed away one by one, and the clouds in the sky slid out of sight over the horizon.

Marty drove along the interstate in the opposite direction from the one he had planned to take. He was getting out of North Carolina the fastest way he could, his schedule be damned.

In the earliest beams of morning light he had considered going to the police—but *what* police? Where? What could he have told them?

When he thought back over what had happened, he knew that everything had been a setup: their names weren't David and Rick and they weren't going to Newton, he was sure of that. They had dropped the information too easily. And why? Because they hadn't planned to shoot anyone and this way, when Charley had called the police, he would have sent them searching in the wrong direction.

Of course, Marty had thought, Rick might take David to a hospital. I could phone in an anonymous tip to check the emergency wards. There can't be too many in Mineraska County.

But he'd known he wouldn't

and he hadn't. For one thing, David was dead and Rick wasn't stupid enough to take a corpse into a hospital. For another, Marty had given his word. He was getting the hell out of there and he was never coming back.

*I'm a traveling salesman, I never saw you, in ten minutes I'm out of this town and I was never here.*

The words echoed in Marty's head as they had since he had spoken them. He was a traveling salesman. It had saved his life; he had begged for his life and been spared. It was the greatest sales job he'd ever handled: selling out his friends for his life.

Not friends, he reminded himself. Strangers.

But that didn't wash with the other voice in his head, the one that told him they were more than strangers. A fellow drinker, a fellow drummer, fellow human beings. Camaraderie was a bar phenomenon that didn't hold much water for Marty—bar buddies came and went in a night, sometimes less—but there was something more important at work here.

Ted was scared out of his skull, Marty thought, but he pulled his gun to save all of us. He was drunk, he was being a hero, he shouldn't have done it—but he did. And when he was shot, Charley ran to his

side even though it was obviously useless. Those were their first reactions. My first reaction was to sit where I was and then beg on my knees. I witnessed three murders and then bought my life with an offer of silence.

And at the back of Marty's mind the scene of Charley's death played over and over like a film loop. Rick shot him—where? In the chest? In the neck? It changed each time Marty imagined it. It wasn't a clean-cut matter the way it had been with Ted. Charley had been shot, that much Marty knew, but whether it had been a fatal wound or not he couldn't say. He'd assumed it was without thinking twice—he'd assumed it was and been glad for it, since that meant he didn't have to run to Charley's side and get killed for his trouble.

But even after Rick had driven off, Marty hadn't gone back in. He had sat in his car, in the parking lot, while for all he knew Charley was bleeding to death inside.

The part that hurt the most was that Charley was Louie DelBianco's old man, that he was a drummer who had survived so much! Marty knew that thirty years back he would have fought, he would have

done what Ted did or something just as stupid, and he would have died like Ted died. And if he had gotten out of door-to-door in 1960, if he had bought a bar or a farm, he knew he would have done what Charley did, at least.

But he hadn't. Fifty years on the road had taught him to survive at all costs, to worry about himself first and others not at all, to talk his way out of scrapes, to say and do anything to accomplish what he wanted. To a salesman, everything and everyone was expendable—you could always move on to another town, another state, but you couldn't get another you. Marty had learned his lessons well.

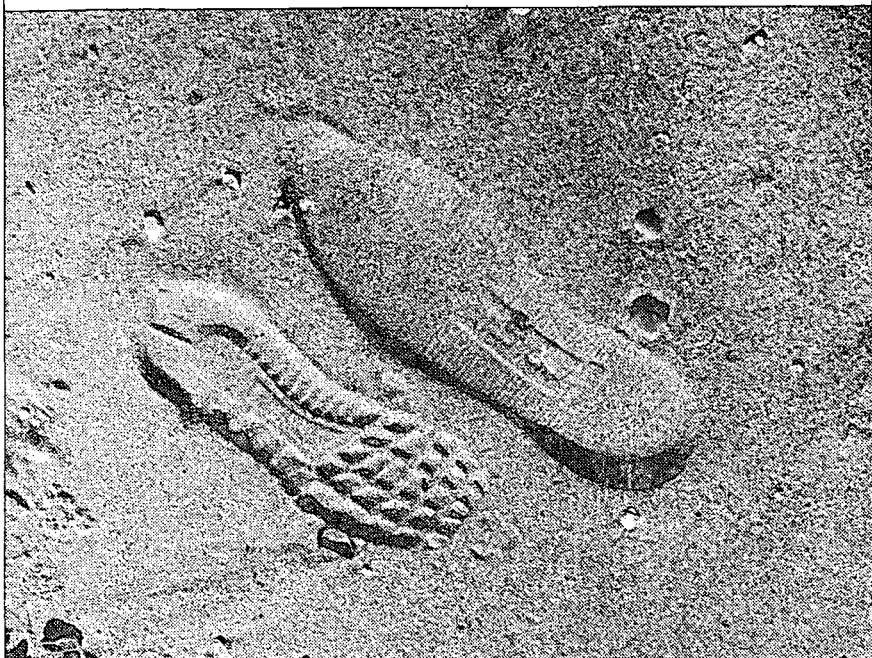
So part of him was glad to be alive, the part that always pulled him off the road if he started thinking too much; but the other part of him, the self-conscious part, told him that there was something more important than being alive, and that was being human.

The first part thought it had directed him to the interstate because it was the fastest way out of town. The second part knew it was because the interstate crossed the Lumber River.

A very nice bridge, indeed.



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



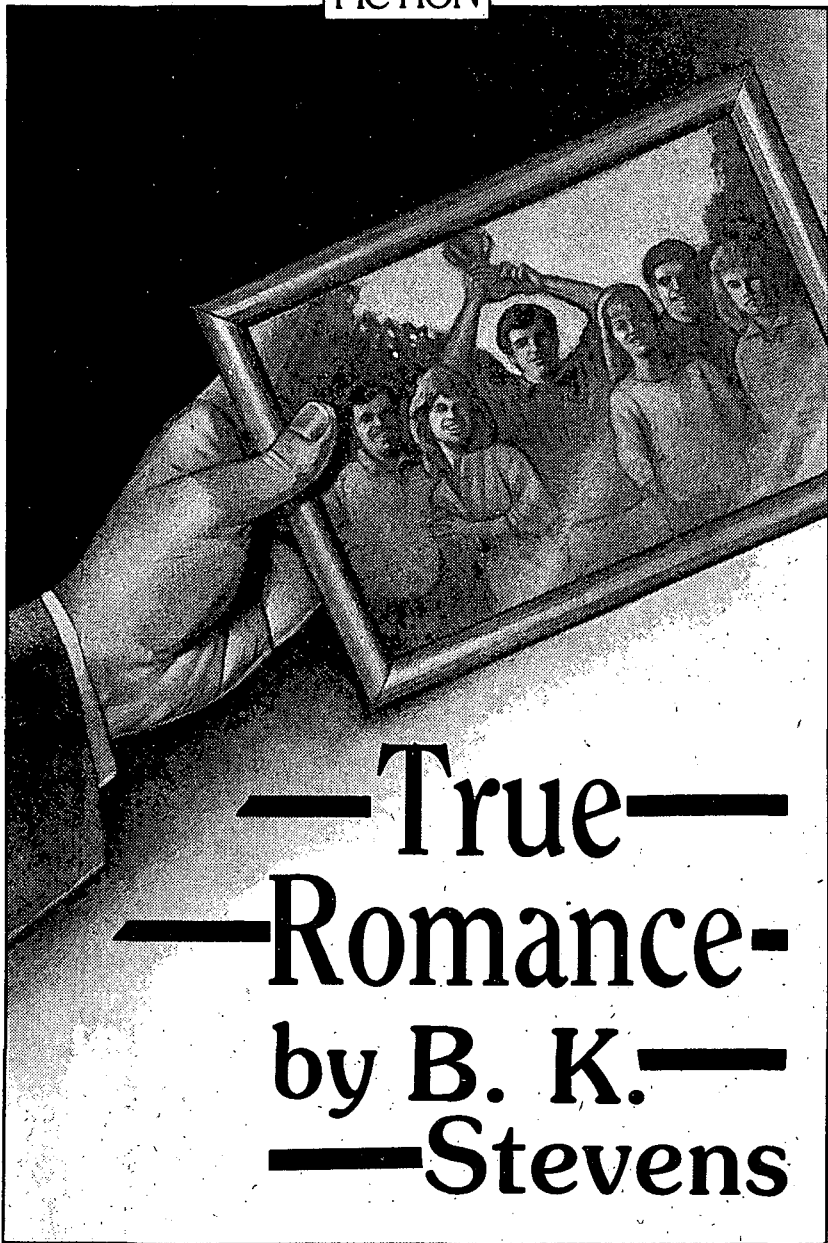
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Which way did he go? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



FICTION



—True—  
—Romance—  
by B. K.—  
—Stevens

Illustration by Neal Hughes

• 70

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**D**ear Ellen,  
I'm glad your sister's feeling better, and I'll be gladder still when you can come home. It's been a little strange around here. Basically, I guess, I'm worried about Bolt, scared he's starting to slip. Oh, his work's as good as ever. We had a double homicide last night, and as usual he solved it in record time. The thing is, this time I don't know *how* he solved it because he sure didn't seem to be concentrating on it. He's changing, Ellen—getting lazy, absentminded, even silly. Much as I hate to say it, I think he's getting senile. I tried talking to Mother about it, but she just smiled and patted me on the head. Come to think of it, she's been acting a little strange lately herself.

I've got some time on my hands right now, so let me tell you about it. The problem really struck me last night. We had Bolt over to dinner—Mother's idea. I told her that it wasn't necessary, that Bolt and I are close professionally but don't socialize much, but she thought he'd feel slighted if I didn't ask him over to meet her. Besides, she said, my letters had made her curious about him. Anyway, even though I told her not to fuss, she fixed a roast, scalloped potatoes, fresh broccoli, that great cheese bread of hers—the works. Conversation

was pretty tame. Bolt must have said twenty times how great the food was, how he hadn't had a home-cooked meal like that since his wife died six years ago; Mother must have said forty times how happy she was to help us out while you're taking care of your sister, how nice it was to cook for a family again after being a widow so long. You know that kind of talk—polite, empty, boring. Kevin kept fidgeting, and I could tell he was itching for dinner to end so he could get in some batting practice. Frankly, I'd rather have been out at the diamond myself.

I was half relieved when the phone rang just as Mother was bringing out her three-berry pie. It was the captain, telling me I'd better get out to Crystal Lake. They'd had a tip from an anonymous male caller about two people, a man and a woman, shot dead in a vacation cabin near Wassop Dock, and a squad car had confirmed it. The captain hated to disturb me at home, he said, but he didn't dare trust the case to anyone else, since no other detective had my ability to get to the bottom of a difficult case quickly. He said a lot of complimentary stuff about my record, the sort of stuff that always makes me squirm, since I know it's really Bolt who built that record up, not me. But I just thanked the

captain and hung up.

"Sorry, Mother," I said, walking back into the dining room. "Double homicide. Come on, Bolt. I'll drive."

You know how he always jumps at the chance to work with me, how he always says he's so eager to watch my technique and learn from me. This time, he just looked down at his plate. "Wouldn't you rather take Reynolds, lieutenant? I'm never much use to you. A double homicide—you'll need someone younger, more active. Besides, your mother went to all the trouble of baking a pie. I'd hate to leave without even tasting it."

See what I mean, Ellen? Lazy.

"We'll have to pass on the pie," I said brusquely. To tell the truth, I was terrified at the thought of handling a homicide on my own, without Bolt around to tell me what was going on and what to do next. "Reynolds is a good cop, but he's not here. You are. Sorry, Mother. You understand."

"Of course, Walt," she assured me. "I'll save the pie for you—for both of you. You'll come back for a piece, won't you, Mr. Bolt?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Johnson," he said promptly.

"Don't count on it," I said, sticking my gun in my holster. "We could be out all night. Ready, Bolt? Let's go."

Things at the lake were bleak. Not many people go there this early in the season, so we passed a lot of dark cabins, a lot of empty driveways, before we spotted the cluster of squad cars and red lights in front of a big, boxy cabin near Wassop Dock. This was no fisherman's shack. It looked rustic, but you could tell they had made it that way on purpose—a sturdy, sprawling redwood thing, maybe five years old. The living room had a hardwood floor and a huge fireplace, with picture windows overlooking the lake. There was a lot of dust and no clutter, like the room hadn't been used in a while. Aside from that, it looked pretty normal.

The master bedroom, though—that was awful. I never get used to scenes like that. The woman had fallen across the bed, shot twice in the chest. She was dark-haired and fortyish, wearing a red lace negligee. A champagne glass lay next to her, like it had fallen from her hand, making a small, dark stain on the pink sheets. The man was sprawled on the floor, face up, dressed only in undershorts.

The coroner crouched next to him, blocking my view. "What have we got?" I asked. "Lovers' quarrel? Murder-suicide?"

The coroner looked up. "Nope," she said. "Two murders. Both shot from at least a

few feet away—him once, her twice. Looks like this one put up a fight before he got it. See? He took a couple of blows to the back of the head. Hit with something heavy and sharp.”

“Like what?” I demanded.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she drawled. “A fireplace poker, maybe.” She pointed to the bloody poker lying two inches from his head.

If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a smart-aleck coroner. “Thanks a bunch,” I said, glancing nervously at Bolt to check his reaction. He was gazing out a window, sort of halfsmiling to himself. Absentminded, like I said. I turned to a uniformed cop. “Got any names for me?”

“Yes, sir,” the uniform said promptly. “I patrol this area, and I see a lot of them both, summers. She’s Constance Prynn—Mrs. Constance Prynn.” He wiggled an eyebrow significantly. “His name is Otto Tell.”

“Constance Prynn? Sounds familiar. Did she own this place, or did he?”

“They both did—with their spouses, and with a third couple, the Thomases. Mr. Thomas once told me they take turns using it for vacations and weekends. They’re all old college friends, I think.”

“I see,” I said and started strolling around the room. There was nothing much to see—an overturned end table and some

cosmetic bottles knocked off the bureau, but no other signs of a struggle. A silky red and white dress was draped over a chair, with red high heels and a red purse sitting on the floor nearby. When I looked in the closet, I saw faded bluejeans and an orange sweatshirt hanging up, a pair of sneakers on the shelf above them. Socks were stuffed into one, Mr. Tell’s wallet and keys into the other.

By this time, Bolt had wandered over and was peering nearsightedly into the closet. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s check the rest of the house.”

The only interesting room was the kitchen. Two potatoes were baking in the oven, two steaks and two bowls of salad waited in the refrigerator. The table tucked into the bay window was set, naturally, for two—pink linen tablecloth, nice china, wine glasses, candles, real silver, red rosebuds.

It felt sad. “Well,” I sighed, looking across the room at Bolt, “someone sure had a romantic evening planned. All very elegant, isn’t it?”

His eyes got that light bulb look. “Yes, indeed,” he said. “All very, very elegant. An important point, sir.” And he wrote it down.

I didn’t know why he was making such a big deal about it. At least there wasn’t much doubt about what had hap-

pened there. The only real question was which one had done it—her husband, or his wife. Considering the blows to Mr. Tell's head, the husband seemed like a safe bet.

"Mr. Prynn," I said confidently. "Wouldn't you say so?"

"Definitely the logical person to question first," Bolt agreed, "since the anonymous caller was male. And are you planning to talk to Mrs. Tell next, sir, and then Mr. and Mrs. Thomas?"

Damn. I'd forgotten all about the anonymous caller. That did add a wrinkle. And if Bolt assumed I'd want to question all those people, maybe the case wasn't as open and shut as I'd thought. I collected myself hastily. "They'll do for starters," I said.

We didn't talk much on the way to the Prynn house. You know how I hate this part of the job. It's always rough informing the next of kin, and when the next of kin is a suspect, it's hell. Maybe this Prynn was a violent creep who'd just shot down his wife and her lover. Then again, maybe he was a poor, innocent sap about to get the shock of his life. Maybe he'd fake hysterics to try to throw me off, and maybe his grief would come straight from the soul. Either way, I was headed for one of those noisy, emotional scenes I

never know how to handle.

Cliff Prynn came to the door wearing silvery metallic shorts, cut real skimpy, and a sleeveless black T-shirt with *Totally You* written across it in fancy script. He's a big guy, not so much tall as built, all his muscles snaking around in thick, tight ridges, so sharply defined they're distracting. He's tan, too, so dark and so even that you know the sun didn't do it. You add the blond hair and the blue eyes and the square jaw, and you've got the kind of guy who makes every man in a ten-mile radius feel like a runt. Bolt gave a little gasp, and I knew just what he was thinking. Me, all I could think about was how much damage a guy like that could do with a poker.

I identified myself and, as gently as I could, told him about his wife. Before I got halfway through my spiel, his right hand shot to his left wrist.

"Wait," he ordered. "Pulse check."

God. A heart condition. In another minute this guy could be dead from the shock. "Quick, Bolt!" I said. "Call an ambulance!"

"What?" Prynn looked up, annoyed. "Oh, don't be silly." He frowned briefly, and then his brow smoothed. "One hundred forty. Not bad. But you should be careful when you give people news like that. I'm in

training, and these sudden jumps in heart rate louse up my whole regimen."

Maybe he'd gone into shock. "Did you understand what I said, sir? Your wife's been killed—"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "Shot twice. You told me all that. Well, that's perfect. Just perfect. Now there'll be funeral arrangements, her relatives all over the place—right when I've got the spring marathon coming up, and the aerobics demonstration at the mall. Perfect."

He agreed to talk to us but acted grumpy and graceless about it, saying we might as well come in since we'd already ruined his workout anyway. The most striking thing about the living room was a big oil painting of him, hanging over the sofa. It was colorful and sort of squiggly, like those paintings of the Olympics, and Prynn looked pretty much the way he did last night, with the shorts and the T-shirt and the tan and the muscles. It felt a little spooky, having two of them in the room at once.

Prynn sat down on the floor, bending his knees, grabbing his ankles, pulling them toward his crotch, and flapping his legs up and down. "So," he said, "you think Connie was shot by a burglar or something?"

"No, sir. No sign of forced en-

try, and the circumstances suggest a—well, a more personal motive. Mr. Otto Tell was shot and killed, too." I paused, embarrassed as all get out. "They were both in stages of undress."

Prynn stretched out his right leg, took hold of his foot, and started bouncing his body toward it. "Otto? Really? So he must have been her sex partner. What do you know?"

I gulped hard. "Then you knew about your wife's—er—activities?"

"I didn't know it was Otto," he said, bouncing more energetically. "She mentioned a Gary Somebody once, and a Justin, or maybe a Jordan. I don't think she ever mentioned Otto. But of course I knew she had sex partners. I don't have much time for all that. Staying in shape takes a hell of a lot of work, and I don't like to deplete my fluids too often. Breaks concentration, creates chemical imbalances—the worst thing for you, really. So Connie needed other outlets. Besides, it was her research interest."

"Her research interest?"

"Yeah, she was a psychologist." He stretched out his left leg and started bouncing toward that. "She wrote books."

Constance Prynn. Now I could place the name. "They were books about adultery, weren't they, sir?"

"Mostly. Her first one was



*The Fornication Factor: Distrust, Disease, Destruction.* That was published just before we got married, and I used the royalties to open my health club—Totally You Tanning and Toning.” He looked us over briefly. “I’ll give you both membership applications. We’ve got a weight-training instructor who’s great with beginners.”

“Thanks for the suggestion,” I said dryly. “Could you tell me more about your wife’s books?”

“Hell, I can’t remember them all.” He walked over to a bookcase and started pulling out paperbacks. “Let’s see. A few years after we got married, she wrote *The Adultery Option: Choices and Challenges*. Next was *Responsible Adultery*, then *Adultery Now*, then *Viva Adultery!*—that was a best seller. There was another one, a few months ago, but I don’t see it here.”

Bolt spoke up then—surprising, since he usually just takes notes during interrogations. “I read that one, sir. *Beyond Adultery: Struggles and Successes of Second Marriages*. Very inspirational, if I may say so.”

Prynn shrugged. “I guess so. I don’t get much time for reading.” His eyes traveled to a large framed photograph on top of the bookshelf. “Connie and Otto. Who would have guessed? She kept herself in decent shape, and he was always a skinny lit-

tle nothing, even in college. And now—geez, he looked like an old man.” He handed me the photograph. “See? That was taken two years ago at our twentieth college reunion, when I got the trophy for the men’s tennis singles.”

Prynn himself was in the center of the photograph, holding the trophy over his head and grinning. His wife stood a little behind him, looking very attractive, very sophisticated, very bored. Otto Tell was on the far left of the group, a thin, short man with gray-streaked black hair and real intense eyes that seemed to jump out at you, even in a photograph.

“Is that Mr. Tell’s wife standing next to him?” I asked. “And who might the other couple be?”

“John and June Thomas. We’ve all been best friends since college.” He studied the photograph. “God—June’s let herself go to hell. Susannah Tell never was worth looking at, but June was the prettiest girl on campus, and now she’s a regular flab-bucket. John isn’t much better. Look at that double chin! Nothing ages you faster, and simple isometrics can prevent it.” To demonstrate, he tilted his head far back, stared at the ceiling, and slowly began dropping his jaw low and snapping it up sharp.

“Well, everyone changes, sir.



I guess nothing makes you feel those changes like a reunion." I was thinking of our last high school reunion, of how old everybody looked at the dance and how old I felt afterwards. "Did you see Mrs. Prynn at all tonight?"

"No, I don't think so." He was speaking slowly, still popping his chin up and down. "I left the club at five and had dinner with my nutritionist. By the time I got home, it was almost seven, and I went straight to the exercise room to begin my workout. I don't think Connie was around. At least, I didn't notice her."

Prynn was doing squathrusts by the time we left. He sure didn't seem crushed by her death. Then again, it sounded like their marriage had died long ago. As Bolt and I got into the car, I wondered why the Prynn's had bothered to stay married at all, and thought about how some people get into ruts so deep it would take dynamite to get them out, how they'll put up with almost anything rather than risk a change. "Force of habit," I remarked. "It's a powerful thing, Bolt."

He didn't say anything, and I looked over at him. That was a shock. His head was tilted back, and he was staring straight up, dropping his jaw down, and snapping it back sharp.

"Bolt!" I cried. "What's wrong?"

He jerked to attention. "Nothing, sir. Just exercising. Yes, yes—force of habit. An important point. I'll keep it in mind when we talk to Mrs. Tell. And your observation about reunions was brilliant. That could have been the spark, couldn't it? Everyone changes, just as you said."

He wasn't making much sense, but I'm used to that. Somehow, he was working the case out, racing far ahead of what I knew while assuming he was scrambling to keep up with me. Sooner or later, he'd slow down enough to explain it. Fine. The exercising, though—that was weird. Silly, like I said.

In a way, Susannah Tell looks like her husband—little and dark and intense, not what you'd call pretty but full of energy and smarts. She was wearing jeans and a plaid shirt. On her, they looked businesslike. When I told her about the murders, she wobbled and put a hand to her forehead.

"Shocking!" she said. "Awful! Poor Otto! Poor Connie! Know who did it? Burglars?"

"No, ma'am, it doesn't look that way. May we come in?"

She hesitated for just a moment. "Guess so. Embarrassing, but can't be helped."

A man sat perched on her

sofa. You should have seen him, Ellen—white jacket, pink shirt, red silk tie, white slacks, red belt, pink socks. His shoes—white, naturally—were tucked under the coffee table. On top of the table sat a half-eaten tuna sandwich, a bottle of scotch, two glasses, a single yellow rose in a vase. As for the man, I recognized him immediately from the photograph. Who could forget that double chin?

Susannah Tell gestured toward him awkwardly. "John Thomas. Old friend. Close friend. John, Lieutenant Johnson. Sergeant Bolt. Terrible news. Otto and Connie—both dead. Shot. At the cabin."

"Oh, my!" he exclaimed, standing up. "That's shocking! That's awful! Do you know who did it? Was it burglars?"

"No." I was starting to feel sorry for burglars. Everyone seemed so ready to suspect them of murder. "When did you last see your husband, Mrs. Tell?"

"Monday," she said promptly. "Three fifteen. Appointment with marriage counselor."

"Susannah and Otto are separated," John Thomas supplied, sitting down again. "Otto moved out several months ago and got an apartment on Firch Street. Susannah didn't see him much, except at the counselor's office."

"Oh? Why did you separate, Mrs. Tell? Because of Connie Pryn?"

"No. Didn't know about that. Surprising. No, it was Otto. Very jealous. Always was, even in college. Became irrational, sometimes violent. Couldn't stand any more. Had to split up, try to work things through. Started seeing the counselor. Sessions didn't help much."

I can guess why, I thought, looking at John Thomas. Instead of seeing a counselor, maybe she should have stopped seeing her old, close friend. Poor Otto Tell. His jealousy didn't seem all that irrational to me. Then again, he'd been at the cabin with an adultery expert, and chances were they hadn't gone there just to discuss her theories.

"I don't know much about your husband, Mrs. Tell," I said. "Could you fill me in? Did he have any enemies, for example?"

"No, no," she said vigorously. "Nice man, except for his jealousy. Intelligent. Hardworking. Owned a restaurant-lounge at Murphy and Third."

"I think I know it. The Fork 'n' Cork?"

She nodded. "Named it myself," she said proudly.

I learned long ago that there's no tactful way to ask for an alibi, so I came straight out with it. "Could you tell me where you were and what you did this evening, Mrs. Tell?"

She didn't seem surprised or

offended. "Certainly. Can't be very precise about times. Give you my best guesses. Worked until approximately five twenty. Then left Specs in Secs, took Route 3—"

"What?" I cut in, startled, "Specks in Sex?"

"Yes, Specs in Secs. You know—Spectacles in Seconds. Well, not literally seconds. Fifty-six minutes, generally. Walk in with your prescription, walk out with twenty-twenty vision and fashion frames. When you've got no time to waste, we put glasses on your face. I'm founder, head optician." She peered at Bolt for a moment. "Yes," she said, "would look ten years younger in wire rims. Well. Took Route 3, arrived home approximately five forty. Fed cat, changed clothes. Put leftover lasagna in microwave, made salad. Dinner on table at six fifteen sharp. Finished, six forty-five. Washed dishes, read newspaper. John arrived seven o'clock."

A convenient arrival, since the call about the bodies had come in at seven thirty. I turned to her companion. "Can you confirm that, Mr. Thomas?"

"Absolutely." He'd been sitting coiled, waiting for his turn, and now he pounced on the question. "It was exactly seven o'clock. I'd left my office precisely at six-forty-five—you can ask my assistant. And the drive

here takes precisely fifteen minutes. You can time it yourself."

He'd given me more information than I'd asked for, and that always makes me suspicious. Maybe he'd done Susanah Tell's dirty work for her. Maybe getting rid of a jealous husband was the real motive. "You mentioned an office," I said. "What office is that?"

"Creative Chromatics. I'm the Senior Color Consultant. Here, let me give you my card." He reached under the coffee table and pulled a dark pink card case out of one of his shoes. "We resource interior decorators, fashion designers, businesses of all sorts. We also take on individual clients and do a total hue analysis." He gazed at Bolt. "I can't be sure without running a computer check, but I'd say your sergeant is a green. Picture him in a lime shirt, a turquoise sweater, a single emerald earring. Dazzling!" He turned to me and sighed. "As for you, lieutenant, I'm afraid you're a beige."

"I'll try to live with it. So you stayed at work until six forty-five. You usually work that late?"

He blushed, almost matching his shirt. "No, I usually leave at five. But I had some bills to pay, some letters to write—you know how those things pile up. Anyway, my assistant was with

me the whole time, so she can vouch for me. I never budged from my desk, and then I drove straight here. I didn't make any stops, not even for dinner. Susannah fixed me a sandwich." He gestured toward the plate on the coffee table.

"You didn't go home first? Did you call home?"

"No." He looked at the floor. "You see, lately I've been telling my wife I have to work late every Thursday night—for the Spectrum Seminars, you know. Well, actually my assistant teaches those seminars, but she covers up for me. So that I can see Susannah. You understand." He swallowed hard. "I hope you can be discreet about this, lieutenant."

I shrugged. "You were here when I arrived, and you confirmed some things Mrs. Tell said. Your name has to go into my report."

"I see." Now he was almost as white as his shoes. "But the newspapers don't have to know, do they? Because I—well, I don't want my wife to know. Her father owns Creative Chromatics. It could get awkward."

"These things usually get awkward," I said, standing up. "I'll have to talk to your wife, and I can't make any promises about what I will or won't say to her. Maybe you should talk to her yourself tonight."

"Sensible suggestion, John,"

Susannah Tell said, nodding at him briskly. "Nice, friendly chat with June. Could help."

His double chin quivered and sank. "There's no such thing as a nice, friendly chat with June," he moaned. "She'd get hysterical. She'd call her father. If she found out about—about all this, she'd fall apart."

"She may handle it better than you think," I said kindly. "Sometimes we underestimate people. Well, let's go, Bolt."

He started to follow me to the door, then suddenly turned back to face John Thomas. It stunned me, Ellen—he's never asked a suspect a single question before. "I guess you made *one* stop on your way here, didn't you, Mr. Thomas?" he said.

"No," Thomas said, flushing again, almost as bright as his tie now. "Absolutely not. I swear it."

"I think you must have, sir," Bolt said, and pointed to the coffee table. "To pick up that rose for Mrs. Tell."

"Oh." Thomas relaxed only slightly. "No, I—well, I had that delivered to my office, around three. You can ask my receptionist. She took the delivery."

"Sorry to break in like that, sir," Bolt said as we walked back to the car, "but I wanted to make sure Mrs. Tell hadn't bought the rose for herself. You were just taking that for

granted, of course, and, as always, you were right. I hadn't even seen the connection until you made that remark about underestimating people. Well. Time for pie?"

"Pie?" It had all gone past me in a blur. I didn't see why the rose mattered at all, I hadn't meant anything by my remark, and the pie bit floored me completely. "What do you mean, pie?"

"Why, the three-berry pie, sir, the one your mother so kindly baked for us. Can't we go have some now? There's no pressing need to see Mrs. Thomas tonight, is there? And you practically promised Mr. Thomas that he'd have a chance to talk to her first, and while I'm sure the lab results will confirm your theories, we can't actually do anything until we get the reports, and your mother's waiting for us—well, sir, it sure looked delicious."

See what I mean, Ellen? He was almost begging. It just isn't like Bolt to get worked up about some pie, especially not in the middle of a big case. I tell you, something's wrong. "I guess we can call it a night," I said. "And if you're all hot about that pie, all right. It's almost twelve, though. I'm sure Mother gave up on us and went to bed."

But she was still up, still dressed, still bouncing around the kitchen like serving pie at

midnight is the best thing life has to offer. I ate quickly and then started commenting about how late it was. Now, you know Bolt's sharp. You know how he hangs on every word I say, picking up hints I don't even know I've dropped. Last night he was as dense as week-old oatmeal. I yawned, I stretched, and none of it registered. It wasn't like he was all wrapped up in the conversation, either. Mostly, he just smiled this goofy smile and seconded whatever Mother said. Absentminded, like I told you.

Finally, too tired and bored to care about being polite, I stood up. "Long day tomorrow. Think I'll turn in."

"Fine," Mother said, almost before I'd closed my mouth. "Have a good rest, dear. More pie, Mr. Bolt?"

He beamed. "And a little more coffee, please, Mrs. Johnson."

Coffee after midnight. Crazy. And when I came down this morning, Mother handed me my eggs and the news that she'd asked Bolt to dinner again.

"Two nights in a row?" I gaped at her. "Once was a nice gesture, maybe, but you're overdoing it. Besides, Kevin has a Little League game in Crawford tonight, and I'm a chaperone. The bus leaves at five thirty."

"Goodness, that's right," she said evenly. "I forgot all about it."

I sure hope *she* isn't getting senile. Her memory's usually so good. "So I'll tell Bolt tonight's off," I said. "I just hope I can make that bus to Crawford. It's a tough case. Bolt and I may have to work late."

"Oh, I doubt that," she said, buttering her toast and smiling in this weird way. "Mr. Bolt told me a little about the case after you went to bed, and I'd say you're close to a solution. As for tonight, it's a shame you and Kevin can't be here, but I'll do my best to entertain Mr. Bolt by myself. Canceling the invitation might hurt his feelings."

"I don't see why you're so worried about his feelings. We had him over just last night—why should he feel hurt? And I don't see why you're so confident about the case. It's a murky one, Mother. Damn murky."

"Oh, well," she said, still smiling. "I'm sure you'll figure everything out soon, dear. You're such a fine detective."

It was a sweet thing for her to say. And really, even if I'm not always quite as quick as Bolt, I'm not exactly a slouch as a detective, either. At least I'm dependable, which is more than I can say for Bolt lately. When I got to the station, he wasn't there. That's not like him at all—usually, he just about lives at the station when we've got a case going. He'd overslept, probably, and no wonder, after

staying up so late the night before.

"I've been waiting here for fifty-six minutes," I complained when he finally showed up. "The lab reports came in, if you're interested."

"Of course, sir," he said. He looked strange—his eyes all wide, with this new glint to them. Metallic, almost. And his face was sort of glowy, and he looked younger. Something was different, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. "I'm sorry to be late. I had to pick up a couple of things. Did the lab confirm your theories, sir? Only Mrs. Prynn's fingerprints on the champagne bottle, no prints at all on the poker, time of death between six and seven? Mrs. Prynn shot from four or five feet away? Mr. Tell shot at closer range, when he was already on the floor?"

"That's right," I said, shaken. I couldn't remember having theories about any of that stuff.

"Then it all fits, doesn't it, sir? Congratulations. You were right again. Do we talk to Mrs. Thomas next?" He wasn't really looking at me, didn't seem focused on what he was saying. He was fussing with his glasses a lot, polishing them, putting them on, taking them off and polishing them some more. Then, abruptly, he looked up and smiled shyly. "The tie isn't too loud, is it? Do you think

she'll like it?"

Why the hell should he care about whether Mrs. Thomas liked his tie? It rattled me, Ellen—he's never seemed at all vain, and here he was worrying about how a suspect's wife would react to his wardrobe. "The tie is fine," I said numbly. Frankly, it *was* loud—I'd never risk a chartreuse tie myself—but on Bolt, somehow, it looked good.

I'm no expert on how much color consultants make, but I'd guess it's not enough to pay for the kind of house the Thomases have. So either she has a fancy job, I thought, or her father is helping with the mortgage payments as well as paying her husband's salary. Either way, John Thomas might be desperate to hold onto his wife, maybe desperate enough to commit murder if jealous little Otto Tell found out about the affair with Susannah and threatened to blow the whistle.

When I showed June Thomas my badge, she looked grim but not surprised. "My husband said you might come by. I'm glad you did. I want to clear up some misunderstandings. This way. I'll get coffee."

While she bustled off to the kitchen, Bolt and I waited in the living room, idling by an arrangement of framed photographs over the mantel. A wedding picture of Mr. and Mrs.

Thomas caught my interest. Naturally, they both looked a lot younger—it's been about twenty years—but with her, the contrast hurt. In the picture, she looked slim and lovely. Now—well, Cliff Prynne wasn't being exactly accurate when he called her a flab-bucket, and of course he wasn't being very nice, but he had a point. Her hair made everything worse, so blonde and brittle and bumpy that you knew she'd spent half her life under a dryer. It looked like a straw helmet stuck on a bloated cotton ball. It was a mistake. A bad mistake.

"Here we are," she said, coming in with a tray crowded with cookies and cream and little cups. "Now, let me explain about last night. I'm afraid John gave you the wrong impression. You see, we've both been very concerned about poor Susannah, because of her marriage breaking up. Since we're all such good friends, John and I do whatever we can to help, and sometimes he drops by her house to comfort her. That's all. But last night, poor John was so upset after hearing about poor Otto and poor Connie that he may have implied that he—well, that he was with poor Susannah for some other reason. He wasn't. He's always been a very good husband, completely faithful to me. Always. Completely."



You could tell she didn't believe it, didn't seriously expect us to believe it. This was the official story, for our report and the newspapers and any friends tactless enough to ask. Probably no one would swallow it, but I guess that for some people, telling an obvious lie is easier than admitting the obvious truth.

"I see," I said. "Well. It would help us to know more about the victims. You were pretty close with both of them, weren't you?"

"Very close," she said, relaxing a little, like she was glad I hadn't asked about her husband instead. "I'll miss them so much. No one can ever replace them. There are no friends like old friends."

"Yeah, they're the ones you can count on," I said, just to have something to say, and could have kicked myself the minute the words were out. It must've sounded sarcastic. Susannah Tell hadn't exactly turned out to be an old friend June Thomas could count on. I covered up as quick as I could. "Did you know that Connie Prynn and Otto Tell were lovers?"

"Not exactly." She stirred her coffee slowly. "Everyone knew Connie had affairs, of course. She didn't make a secret of it. She bragged about it." June Thomas sniffed in distaste. "I hope you understand that al-

though poor Connie was an old, dear friend, I didn't approve of her books or her behavior, and I didn't encourage her to confide in me. She used to, but I had to ask her to stop. She said such shocking things!"

"Like what?" I didn't know if it would be relevant to the case, but it sounded interesting.

"Oh, tasteless, terrible things about her husband, her sex life—subjects nice women don't discuss at all. Why, she once said that Cliff was a good lover when they first got married, but then he got so obsessed with body building that he became a biceptual. What lady would say such a thing? She tried to tell me details about her affairs, too, but I wouldn't listen. The very thought of it disgusted me."

For the first time, I considered June Thomas as a suspect. Even if she didn't have a direct motive, maybe she was a fidelity fanatic. Maybe she hated Connie Prynn for having affairs, found out about last night's session with Otto Tell, and decided to cleanse the cabin she co-owned. Sounds farfetched, sure, but I've run across weirder motives for murder.

"What about Otto Tell?" I asked. "Any helpful information about him?"

She shrugged. "Not really. I always felt sorry for him because his wife neglected him so."

She never had time for him—too wrapped up in her precious career.” She packed a lot of venom into the last word, as if next to having an affair, having a career was the worst thing a woman could do. “Mind you, I’m not saying Susannah cheated on him. Frankly, even if she’d wanted to—and I wouldn’t put it past her, because there’s always been something cheap about her—she’s so homely that no man would have her.”

I wondered if June Thomas had any friends she didn’t hate. “Let’s focus on last night,” I said. “Where were you, and what did you do?”

Her eyes narrowed. Obviously she knew just what the question implied. And obviously I’d just made her list of shocking, disgusting people. “I was right here,” she snapped. “I went out in the afternoon to get my hair done, but I was back by four, and I didn’t go out again.”

“Can you prove that?” I asked.

She glared at me. “No. Why should I have to?”

“Just curious,” I said, standing up. Well, if I’d made her list, she’d made mine. “Thanks for the coffee, Mrs. Thomas.”

I think adultery stinks, Ellen. You can be sure of that. After talking to Mrs. Thomas, though, I found myself feeling sorry for the adulterers. Maybe it was because in this bunch

they outnumbered the faithful spouses two to one, making fooling around seem normal. Or maybe it was because all these marriages seemed so sad, so wrong. The Thomases, for example. My hunch was he’d married her partly for her looks, partly for her money. When the looks faded and the money lost its charm, what was left to hold them together?

“Poor John Thomas,” I said as Bolt and I got into the car. “He and his wife don’t seem like much of a match, do they?”

He chuckled. “Not much of a match. Oh, that’s rich, sir. I’ll remember that one. Now, do we go straight to Mr. Tell’s apartment, or did you have something else in mind first?”

“No,” I said, numb. “Nothing else in mind.” It’s just standard procedure, I assured myself. Searching a victim’s apartment—it’s just one of those things you always do on a homicide. Bolt doesn’t have any specific reason for wanting to go there. He’s not *that* far ahead of me.

He seemed to have something specific in mind, though, as he stode through Otto Tell’s apartment, humming and taking notes. It was a small place, one bedroom, messy and sort of depressing. Chances were he’d had Connie Prynn there from time to time, but even so it felt like a lonely place. Like Tell’s

shirt and suit and tie, tossed on his unmade bed. It must feel bleak when you don't have anyone around to nag you about hanging up your clothes, to care about whether you look wrinkled or not.

Bolt was nosing through some junk in a little heap on the bureau, but it didn't look like much—just a comb, some change, and a crumpled tissue. I sighed, thinking we'd have to get down to the tedious part now, sifting through bureaus and pockets on the slim chance of finding a threatening letter from Cliff Prynn or Susannah Tell, or even John or June Thomas.

"Well, sir?" Bolt asked, annoyingly perky. "Are we ready for the kitchen? Would you say we've found all we need in here?"

Damn. What had we found? "Sure," I managed. "All we need."

The kitchen—now, that was *really* depressing. You couldn't ask for more vivid reminders that twenty-four hours ago that pathetic thing in the morgue had been breathing and walking around. A saucepan sat on the stove, a trace of crusted-over tomato soup in the bottom. On the table, more evidence of a life cut short: the dirty soup bowl, a crumb-speckled plate, last night's newspaper open to the sports page. It made me

think about how suddenly it can all end. When Otto Tell heated that soup and read that paper, he must have felt pretty secure, not even dreaming that a bullet was waiting for him. Still, when you think about it, he was playing a dangerous game. Cheating on his wife, sleeping with another man's wife—that's asking for trouble. You arouse that many emotions, tangle up that many relationships, and something's bound to blow up sooner or later.

I turned to Bolt. "Almost predictable, wasn't it?" I said.

"Very predictable," he agreed. "The murderer knew that. Old friends are the ones you can count on, just as you said to Mrs. Thomas. Those sly little asides of yours, sir—I can't tell you how much they've helped me follow your thinking on this case. Well. This certainly was a successful search, wasn't it? Back to Mr. Thomas now? Do you think we can wrap it all up by noon? I have a luncheon engagement."

A luncheon engagement. A double homicide on our hands, and he was worried about some luncheon engagement. It irked me, Ellen. He was talking like the search had settled something, but there wasn't one scrap of evidence at that apartment; he was implying John Thomas was the murderer, but he

couldn't be sure, not really, and I was sick of the way he kept rushing me. "We're not ready to make an arrest, Bolt," I said harshly.

"Oh, but don't you think we will be, sir, after you talk to Mr. Thomas?" He was almost arguing with me, and you know that isn't like him. "I can understand your desire to be thorough, but you've uncovered so much evidence, and Mr. Thomas must be just about ready to give you the rest. A little pressure should do it, and you're so good at applying that." He slapped me on the back. "Give it a try, sir! Why let this case drag on and on?"

Maybe he had a point. If Thomas was the murderer—and Bolt never fails to spot the murderer—he was probably overcome with remorse. Probably Mrs. Tell had pushed him to do the murders. Probably I could push him to confess, if only I could act like a tough cop. But you know that's not my style. I sat down at the kitchen table and weighed my chances. I could think of the right lines to use, but could I make them sound convincing?

"It all depends on the delivery," I said, thinking out loud.

"The delivery!" he cried, thumping his fist on the table. It made me jump. "Why didn't I think of that? It's the perfect place to start. Pin him down

about the delivery. Why, his receptionist may even be able to help. She took the delivery—maybe she saw the card. She should at least remember the florist, and that could give us the hard evidence we need. By God, sir! How do you do it? To focus so quickly on the biggest flaw in the plan, the biggest risk the murderer took. Sir, I'm overwhelmed."

So was I. I held my head in my hands and tried to unravel it. He had to be talking about the yellow rose on Susannah Tell's coffee table, the one delivered to John Thomas's office yesterday afternoon. Did Bolt think that they had plotted the murders together, that Thomas had dictated an incriminating message to the florist, only to have the rose delivered to himself? That seemed crazy. Come to think of it, the whole bit about Thomas having a rose delivered to himself sounds fishy. Maybe it was Susannah Tell who had ordered the rose, dictated the message, arranged the delivery. But would any sane murderers communicate in writing, through a florist? Why not just pick up a phone? No, for once Bolt's theories simply wouldn't wash.

"It's just too implausible, Bolt," I said gently. "Any way you look at it, the whole thing is implausible."

He half laughed. "It certainly

is. I'm surprised they expected us to believe it. Mr. Thomas wasn't exactly convincing as the anxious lover, was he? He lies to his wife so he can be with Mrs. Tell—and then he idles at his desk for nearly two hours, doing nothing in particular, letting his mistress cool her heels at home. Meanwhile, she prepares for his arrival by changing into old clothes and eating dinner alone, so that she has nothing but a sandwich to offer him when he finally shows up. Those two as lovers! It's implausible, sir, just as you said. Why, I could just as easily believe that Connie Prynn and Otto Tell were having a hot romance."

I stared at him. Connie Prynn and Otto Tell *were* having a hot romance. Weren't they? We'd found them in the bedroom at the cabin, her in her nightgown, him in his underwear. If they weren't having a hot romance, why were they so cosy? More important, why had someone gotten jealous or angry enough to burst in on them, beating him over the head before shooting them both? How could Bolt deny the clear evidence of what had happened? "There was quite a clash in that cabin," I pointed out.

He grinned in appreciation. "A witty summation, sir. Yes, quite a clash. It was all so carefully coordinated—Mrs. Prynn's

red nightgown, her red dress and shoes and purse, the pink sheets and tablecloth, the red rosebuds. Mr. Tell's orange sweatshirt wasn't quite the finishing touch the color scheme needed, was it? Quite a clash, as you say."

The color scheme? The orange sweatshirt? What the hell was he talking about? I was too confused and irritated to care about sounding stupid. "What's so special about the sweatshirt?" I demanded.

"Nothing special at all," he admitted cheerfully. "There were so many other discrepancies—the sweatshirt just happened to be the one I noticed first. But do you know what drove everything home for me, sir? It was your remark about how elegant everything was, about how someone had planned a romantic evening. That's when it hit me: that Otto Tell sure hadn't been planning on a romantic evening. There was nothing elegant about his sweatshirt, or his old jeans or sneakers. Nothing about him fit in with the way Mrs. Prynn was dressed or the table she'd set." Bolt paused, glancing at the stove. "And this kitchen—what further confirmation could we need? The saucepan, the dishes, even last night's newspaper open on the table—we couldn't ask for clearer proof that Otto Tell ate his din-

ner right here, all by himself. Connie Prynn was planning an intimate dinner for two at the cabin, but obviously Mr. Tell wasn't planning to join her."

That clinched it, all right. So Connie Prynn and Otto Tell hadn't really been lovers, just like Susannah Tell and John Thomas hadn't really been lovers. Weren't any of these people fooling around? As far as I could see, we now had no motive, no suspects, no explanation for the two half-dressed corpses who'd somehow landed in a pink and red love nest together.

Pink and red. That part finally clicked. Pink shirt and socks, red tie and belt. John Thomas, Senior Color Consultant for Creative Chromatics. He matched Connie Prynn, all right—and who else would bother to work out a color scheme for an affair? What's more, he'd apparently shown up hungry at Susannah Tell's door last night. That fit—he'd planned to eat with Connie Prynn, but murder changed the schedule. A lovers' triangle, obviously, and since John Thomas was the only survivor, he had to be the murderer. I didn't see how we could prove it, though.

"It's too thin, Bolt," I said reluctantly. "Color schemes don't carry much weight with juries. If I can't break John Thomas down, we're empty."

"But you can break him down,

sir. Don't you think he'd crack if you asked him to explain the evidence in Otto Tell's bedroom?"

Had there been evidence in Otto Tell's bedroom? I tried to remember what we'd seen. "The heap of clothes on the bed?" I asked doubtfully. "The little pile of junk on the bureau? What do those prove?"

"Exactly, sir! Use exactly those words, exactly that skeptical tone, and force him to admit what those things prove—that Otto Tell was an untidy man who didn't hang up even the good clothes he wore to work. So why were his old jeans and sweatshirt hung up at the cabin? Connie Prynn didn't do it—her dress was just draped over a chair, and it's not likely she'd be more careful with his clothes than with her own. Could Mr. Thomas deny that a third person hung up Mr. Tell's clothes? Then you could point to the bureau and repeat your brilliant observation about force of habit."

What the hell had I said about force of habit? "It's a powerful thing?" I ventured.

"Yes!" Bolt cried, giddy with enthusiasm. "Then, when you confront him with the change and the comb and the Kleenex on the bureau, you can force him to admit that Mr. Tell had the habit of emptying his pockets onto the bureau when he

changed clothes. And when you point out that at the cabin Mr. Tell's wallet and keys weren't on the bureau, when you say they were in his shoes, when you ask Mr. Thomas who has the habit of emptying his pockets into his shoes—well, sir! Don't you think that should break him down?"

Of course. I remembered John Thomas giving me his business card. His card case had been in his shoe. So after he'd killed Otto Tell, he'd undressed him and emptied his pockets, trying to make it look like Tell was Connie Prynn's only lover—anything to keep his own name out of it. The case was looking better. "That might shake him up," I admitted.

"It certainly would," Bolt said, nodding. "Why, if you word it right, you can scare him into thinking you suspect him of being the murderer."

My head shot back so sharp that my neck locked. Didn't I suspect him of being the murderer? "What?" I croaked.

Bolt took it as a reproach. His whole body drooped, like I'd just dropped a steel net over him. "I'm sorry, sir. It's a devious tactic, unworthy of you. Forgive me for suggesting it. The truth is always best—especially since Mr. Thomas must have already guessed part of it. Do you plan to reconstruct the crime for him, sir?"

"Maybe." If Thomas had already guessed part of it, he was miles ahead of me. I looked at Bolt craftily. "Where do you think I should start?"

He took it as a peace offering and blushed. "You flatter me, sir. Reconstructing a crime—that's your department, far beyond my reach. But if you'd like me to try, just to give me some practice—"

"Oh, yes," I said, trying not to sound desperate. "Just for practice. That would be nice."

His face rippled with self-conscious pleasure. "Well, I'd start where you suggested, with the delivery. Mr. Thomas surely knows by now that the yellow rose and the message didn't come from Connie Prynn. He should have realized it immediately, since she would have sent him a red rose, or a pink one. Clearly, the rose came from someone who didn't know about the color scheme, who just wanted to delay Mr. Thomas. As for the message, we can guess what it said—something like, 'Sorry, darling, but I can't make it to the cabin until seven.' Isn't that a safe guess, sir?"

I'd been holding my breath, and had to gulp before I could answer. "Very safe. Keep going."

Bolt looked around the room thoughtfully. "Let's see. I guess I'd bring him here, next, confront him with the evidence, and make him admit that Otto



Tell must have come home, changed into his casual clothes, and eaten dinner alone. Then something happened to make him leave again, in such a hurry that he just stuffed his wallet and keys into his pockets, without stopping to pick up his other things. I'd ask Mr. Thomas what could make Otto Tell rush off like that. And, of course, there's only one possible answer."

I was getting good at this. "Absolutely. We know that. Thomas might be stubborn, though. You might have to spell it out for him."

"Oh, I hardly think so, sir. But if he wouldn't answer—why, I'd have to get tough with him." He squared his shoulders and stomped around the kitchen scowling, trying to look nasty and streetwise, coming up with a cross between Lieutenant Kojak and Captain Kangaroo. "I'd say, 'Come now, Mr. Thomas. Eliminate the excrement. You know how violently jealous Otto Tell could be. You know what would send him speeding off into the night: A phone call, from someone claiming to have seen Mrs. Tell at the cabin with another man. But that call couldn't have come from just anyone. It had to come from someone Otto Tell trusted. An old friend, for example—an old friend who knew about Otto Tell's jealousy and could count

on him to go crazy at any hint that his wife was cheating on him. The call had to come from someone who didn't want to hurt you but desperately wanted to get rid of Connie Prynn, even if it also meant killing Otto Tell, just to cover up." He spun around suddenly and pointed straight at me. "You know who that call came from! It came from your wife!"

I swear, Ellen, for a second I thought he meant you. My heart stopped, my lungs emptied, my kidneys clenched. Then I remembered that Bolt was supposed to be me, and I was supposed to be John Thomas.

Bolt was wiping his forehead with a paper napkin, looking sweaty and exhausted after his performance. "Perhaps I got carried away. I wouldn't want to be too harsh with poor Mr. Thomas. He must be in such terrible shape—mourning for the woman he loved, sick at heart because he suspects she was murdered by the woman he married, guilt-stricken because his affair ended in this tragedy. Especially since it may have been much more than an affair, considering the title of Connie Prynn's last book."

He had dropped the napkin on the table, and I picked it up to wipe my own forehead. Slowly, the title came back to me. "*Beyond Adultery*," I managed. "*Struggles and Successes*

*of Second Marriages."*

"Yes," Bolt said sadly. "That's what she wanted this time—not just another affair to fight off the frustration, but a new life. I keep thinking of your remark about reunions making people realize how much things have changed. Maybe their twentieth college reunion got Mrs. Prynn and Mr. Thomas thinking about how much their marriages had changed, how unsatisfying they were. Do you suppose that's when it started, sir?"

"Could be." I was hardly listening, too wrapped up in thinking about June Thomas. Probably, she'd gotten suspicious about those Thursday night seminars, followed her husband from his office to the cabin, seen him with Connie Prynn, and settled on murder as a solution. She hadn't killed in the passion of the moment, either. She had gone back to her big house to brood, to plot the details of a murder that would eliminate her rival and still allow her to cling to her marriage—a pretty empty, joyless thing to cling to, maybe, but what else did she have? She'd thrown Otto Tell into the plot almost at random, simply because she needed a male victim to play the part of Connie Prynn's lover. And she'd planned it so that her husband would

discover the bodies, would be haunted by the image of his dead mistress for the rest of his life. It had been a cool, ruthless murder.

Bolt was standing by the stove, looking pensive. "No, I don't think you'll have to get rough with Mr. Thomas. He must be in hell right now, imagining how it happened—Connie Prynn waiting for him at the cabin, his wife letting herself in with her own key, holding Mrs. Prynn at gunpoint, forcing her to open the champagne and pour a drink, shooting her down." Bolt shuddered. "Horrible. And what she did to Mr. Tell—that was horrible, too. She must have called him from a pay phone. What do you think she told him, that she'd discovered his wife with her husband?"

I shrugged, too deeply shaken to keep pretending. "To tell the truth—"

"Yes," Bolt cut in. "To Tell, the truth about his wife was the one thing he couldn't believe. She was faithful, but he just wouldn't trust her. So any lie Mrs. Thomas told him would do. Good point, sir." He glanced at his watch. "Did you want to explain anything else to me? Like Mrs. Thomas hitting Mr. Tell over the head with the poker, maybe when he froze at the sight of Mrs. Prynn's body?"

Oh, yes—the poker. I did realize that was another discrepancy. Would a killer armed with a gun bother to bring a poker along as a backup? Or were we supposed to think the killer waited politely while Mr. Tell ran into the living room to find a weapon? No, bringing the poker into the bedroom was a mistake, but Mrs. Thomas had to risk it, because she had to undress Mr. Tell before she shot him.”

That much I could grasp. “Bloodstains,” I said. “If she’d shot him first, she might have gotten bloodstains on his clothes.”

“Or bullet holes,” Bolt added, always thorough. “And she had to make him look like Mrs. Prynn’s lover. So she knocked him unconscious and undressed him—not an easy task, but not impossible, since he was so slight and she’s so, well, unsight. Let me see if I’ve got the rest of it straight. She shot him and hung up his clothes, emptying his pockets into his shoes—that’s her husband’s habit, so it seems most natural to her. Then she drove home, probably figuring her husband would run to her for an alibi after he found the bodies. That would have given her quite a hold on him, wouldn’t it? Not to mention giving her an alibi, keeping them both out of suspicion completely. In-

stead, Mr. Thomas stopped at a pay phone to report the bodies and then went to Susannah Tell’s house.”

“I can see why,” I put in. “He wouldn’t want to face his wife, especially if he suspected her. He’d rather beg an old friend like Mrs. Tell for an alibi.”

“And he’d want to give her an alibi,” Bolt added, “to break the news about her husband to her and warn her that she might be a suspect herself. Ironical, isn’t it, sir? Mrs. Thomas murdered an extra victim just to cover up her husband’s affair with Connie Prynn. But she made him so desperate for an alibi that he faked an affair with Susannah Tell. One way or the other, the gossip was bound to catch up with her.”

“We’ll see how much gossip we can create when we arrest her,” I said grimly, standing up. “Let’s go have a chat with her husband.”

“We can be done by noon, can’t we, sir?” Bolt asked anxiously. “I have that luncheon engagement.”

He was acting silly again, but I did owe him a lot. I smiled at him affectionately. “You bet. We’ll make the arrest by noon, and I’ll do the paperwork. You take the afternoon off. I sure don’t want you to miss that luncheon engagement, and I want you to take your time, en-

joy yourself."

He turned bright red. "I—thank you, sir. Thank you for saying that. It's such a relief. You don't disapprove, then?"

"Of course not," I said, patting him on the shoulder. How could I disapprove? Wasn't he entitled to an afternoon off, after so many years of faithful service to the force? "Have a good time."

"I will, sir," he said, beaming; and then he looked a little alarmed. "But strictly honorable—I want you to rest assured about that, sir."

"Sure, sure." It was hard not to grin. How could he think I'd care about whether he was strictly honorable about reporting the time off? "You're always honorable, Bolt."

"Indeed, sir," he said, all somber. "I want you to understand that I haven't been trying to hide anything from you. How could I hope to? It's just so awkward to discuss, especially—well, at my age, and the relationships involved." His eyes dropped. "You understand."

I was moved, Ellen. It was practically an admission that he knew he was getting senile but hadn't felt able to tell me because I'm his superior officer and might feel obliged to report him. "It's all right, Bolt," I said gently. "I understand. What's a relationship without trust?"

"Yes!" Bolt cried, delighted.

"Trust! That's it, exactly." His face got somber again. "Then I have your blessing, sir?"

So he's getting religious, too. He must be going senile, if he thinks lieutenants have some special power to give our blessings. I tell you, I had a lump in my throat. "Sure thing," I said. "You got my blessing."

Ellen, I'd be embarrassed to tell you how happy he looked.

Well, that's about it. When we questioned John Thomas, he broke down and told us everything, just as Bolt predicted. June Thomas went a little nuts when we arrested her, screaming about how much she hated all her college friends, how she was the only decent one in the bunch. And this afternoon I checked some pawn shops and got what looks like a real lead on the gun. So that part's all right.

It's the other part that bothers me. When Kevin and I left for his Little League game, Mother was cooking up a big meal for Bolt. Not her usual kind of food, either—chicken Kiev, if you can believe that, and this speckly rice, and vegetables I've never heard of. She was humming, too, and I swear I smelled liquor on her breath, like she'd been drinking at lunch, and you know she never does that. Do you think she gets depressed being alone in the house all day, and takes a few

shots for company? Then, when Kevin and I got home at ten o'clock—Mother wasn't there. All we found was a note saying she and Bolt had gone to the Fork 'n' Cork for a drink. So I read Kevin a bedtime story and started writing this letter. If you're wondering why the letter's so long, it's because Mother didn't come home until five minutes ago. That's one twenty-eight, Ellen. When I asked her to explain, she giggled, kissed me on the forehead, and waltzed upstairs without a word. I ask you, Ellen. Is that any way for a mother to behave? A mother her age?

All I can figure is, she and Bolt must have been commiserating, talking about senility and depression, and they didn't realize how late it was. I guess time slips away when you're that old: Nothing seems really urgent any more, so you just sort of linger. It worries me, Ellen.

Anyway, I hope you can come home soon. If Mother could get back to her own house, and her job, and her friends, she'd probably feel a lot better. And maybe you can give me some advice about Bolt. Maybe one of those social service agencies you do public relations for could help him.

Kevin sends his love. I'm sure Mother would, too, if she'd stop grinning long enough to focus.

And you know what emotions are coming your way from

Your loving husband,  
Walt

Dear Walt,

My sister's feeling much better. Her doctor says he's never seen anyone recover from major surgery so quickly. I'm sure I can be home next week.

But don't feel so anxious. I really don't think your mother's unhappy about staying with you. In fact, if she can get more time off from work, I bet she wouldn't mind staying for a while even after I get back.

As for Sergeant Bolt, I wouldn't worry about him, either. All he needs is some personal attention. Your mother has the right idea—invite him over often and let him stay as long as he likes. If you and Kevin get bored, don't hesitate to go to a movie, or go bowling, or go anywhere. Let your mother entertain Bolt alone. She can manage it.

I miss you, Walt. Give my love to Kevin and your mother. And why don't you give my love to Sergeant Bolt, too? I know I've never been close with him before, but I've got a feeling I'll get to know him a lot better soon. So please give him warm regards from

Your loving wife,  
Ellen

# UNSOLVED

by  
Ken Weber

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the December issue.*

Because he was a rookie, Cam Lindsey was determined not to make a single mistake. Also because he was a rookie, he had to go by the book, and the book said quite clearly that any felony, indeed, anything that even looked like a felony, meant that the beat cop, or "first officer on the scene" as Captain Tilley liked to put it, had to call in right away for the senior detective on duty.

Cam Lindsey was a beat cop. He had been on daytime foot patrol now for exactly eleven days—his first assignment since graduating from police college. And the scene in front of him said *felony*, all right. It was manslaughter at least, possibly murder, and maybe—likely—robbery as well.

Cam reached for the radio on his belt but then stopped. He'd only been here a few minutes. One or two more would make no difference. Not to the dead man on the floor anyway. Besides, one more check wouldn't hurt. There was no way he was going to make a mistake.

"Well, young man! Are you going to call your whatever, like the other officer said, or are you just going to stand there?"

Bentley Threndyle's voice startled Cam just a bit.

"Or maybe you're just going to stand there and watch poor Morton finish bleeding!"

Cam looked at the body of Morton Threndyle, then turned uneasily back to the man who had just spoken. Bentley's appearance was a counterpoint to the haughtiness of his voice and manner, for he was covered with spilled paint. There was paint in his sandy grey hair, and on his gold-rimmed glasses, paint all over the expensive tweed jacket and down the right side of his wheelchair. Blobs of it on his knees were still trickling down his pantlegs and filling the creases in his shoes. Even the end of his tie, which stuck out

beneath the buttoned jacket, had paint on it. Bentley Threndyle was a random study in Cardona Ivory #2884. Two pails of it. That was one of the things Cam had already noted. He didn't know why, but he felt it might be important later.

The interior of Threndyle Brothers, Inc., Specialists in Furniture and Other Antiques of the Georgian Period, was in the midst of a renovation. The painters had gone on their lunch break before the shooting occurred, and had left opened cans of paint on the scaffold that now stood precariously askew over the whole scene. In the struggle between Morton Threndyle and the intruder—at least according to Bentley—the paint had been knocked over.

Morton too, or rather his body, was covered in paint. In fact he was lying face down in a pool of Cardona Ivory, in which his blood made little patterns and puddles, all interconnected but refusing to blend. A twisting red trail had almost encircled the body from the sandy grey hair to the almost-white sneakers. Like an incomprehensible modern painting, had been Cam's first thought, very much out of place in this store.

Threndyle Brothers, Inc. was indeed a one of a kind establishment. It was the key business in a street of very trendy, extremely expensive boutiques, although off-the-street business probably represented only a tiny fraction of the Threndyle income. Most of it, according to the rumor on the street, came from international dealings. Morton and his twin brother, Bentley, like their father and grandfather, were among the principal antique dealers on the continent.

Only minutes before, Cam and his partner had heard the shots—two of them—as they were walking down the street past the Threndyle store. Neither had looked in earlier. What with all the antiques covered in canvas sheets, there was nothing to see. The store was closed for the renovation period anyway. They had always made it a point to avoid the Threndyle twins, for neither was very pleasant. In fact, according to the briefing from Captain Tilley eleven days ago, the Threndyle twins were indistinguishable in both appearance and personality, and the only way they could be identified separately was by virtue of the fact that Bentley could not walk.

"Nothing! He's disappeared. Not a trace. I checked the alley both ways. There's no sign of him, but I didn't expect one anyway," Cam's partner said as he came through the back door. "Too bad the paint didn't spill on him too. Maybe he'd have left tracks." He



looked at Cam. "Did you call in? I bet Tilley himself will want this one."

"I . . . uh . . . was just about to." Cam allowed a little twinge of guilt to show in his voice. "Just wanted to make sure we haven't missed anything."

"What's there to miss?" his partner said, somewhat annoyed, while Bentley Threndyle nodded righteous agreement.

"I told you what happened," he said, pushing the wheelchair back so abruptly he almost hit the scaffold. "I told you. The painters weren't gone five minutes when this . . . this . . . this . . . *person* came right through the back door. I know it's supposed to be locked but it wasn't. Morton was going to set out garbage."

Cam almost spoke, then checked himself. When they heard the shots and came running, the front door of the store had been unlocked too. As they burst in to find Morton on the floor and Bentley leaning from the wheelchair holding his brother's wrist, Cam had noted the back door was wide open. He hadn't known about the garbage.

"He came right through the door," Bentley continued, "right up to Morton. I told you all this. He had this gun and he and Morton began to fight. That's why there's paint all over. Then he shot. Twice! Poor Morton. I couldn't help him. By the time you got here he was dead and the man was gone. Look, how much longer do I have to sit here? Can I go? I can't do anything here anyway!"

Cam pulled out his radio. "No," he said, "you'll have to stay, at least until Captain Tilley gets here and until a doctor examines you."

*Why does Cam Lindsey want a doctor to examine Bentley Threndyle?*

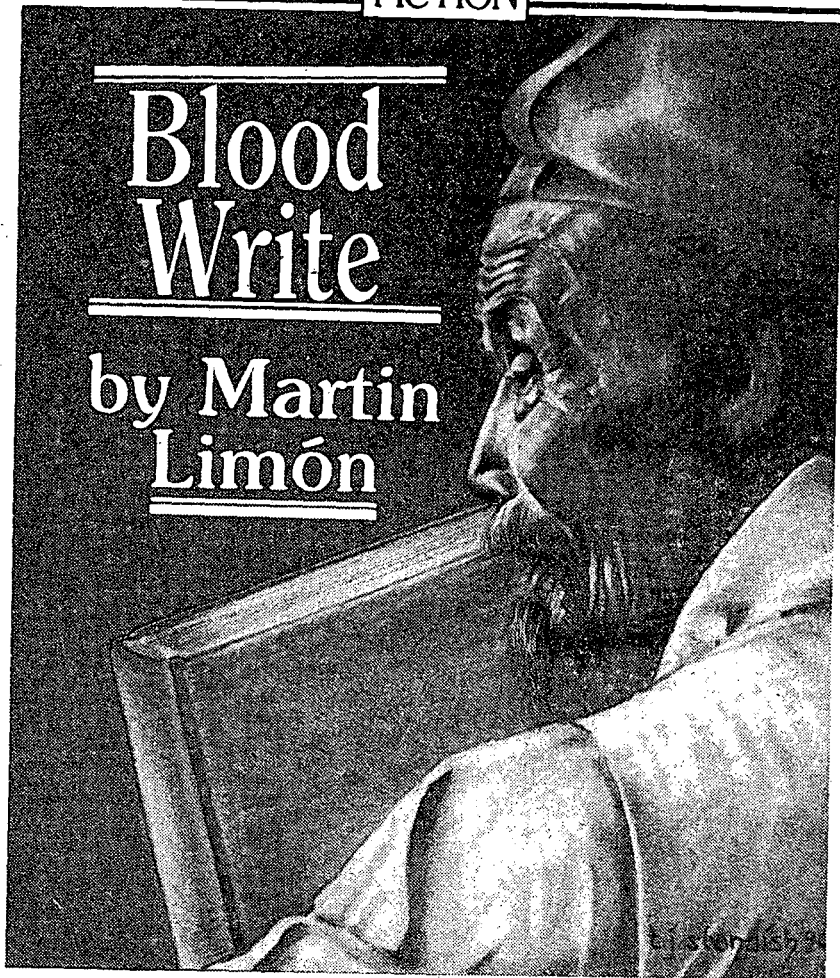
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See page 147 for the solution to the October puzzle.

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# Blood Write

by Martin  
Limón



**A**t the mention of Master Chong's name, the Court Scribe dragged the startled Scholar Li into the Dragon Hall and flung him at the feet of the Great King Sejong Daewang. Scholar Li pressed his head to the wood slat floor and quivered in every bone and sinew, feeling like a tattered gray obscenity amidst the splendor that surrounded him.

The King barked questions and somehow, through his constricted throat, Scholar Li managed to babble out his answers. The Great

King must have understood them because he rose and stomped through the palace, bellowing for his horse.

The Court Scribe jerked Scholar Li to his feet and dragged him to the back courtyard in time to see the King mounting. As soldiers sprang to activity, the great steed raised its forelegs towards the clear sky of the Land of the Morning Calm, and in seconds the King's Guard was ready to ride.

"To the Hall of Maps and Books!" The King and his escort raced off through a rising fog of dust and hooves.

Scholar Li cowered on the cobbled pavement, wringing his hands in fear.

"What is it, man?" the Court Scribe hissed. "What have you done to upset the King so?"

Scholar Li stammered and coughed, fear drying his constricted throat. He squeaked out a few words. "It's Master Chong, sir."

"Yes, yes. I know that. The leader of the Inquiry into Languages."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on, go on. What about him?"

"He's dead, sir."

"Dead? But so young. How did he die?"

"Murder, sir."

The Scribe barked a harsh laugh. "But who would want to murder a lowly reader of books? Nonsense. He was so nearsighted he must have stumbled and killed himself."

"No, sir. Murder." Scholar Li stood up and straightened his shoulders. He would let no one belittle his dead master. Not even one so powerful as the Scribe of the Royal Court.

"Murder, you say? How can you be so sure?"

"Because of the book, sir."

"The book?"

"Yes. The final report of the study we have been conducting all these years. It's gone."

The Scribe held back his laughter, but his eyes twinkled at this strange scholar before him. "Are you saying that someone murdered Master Chong in order to get this book? This final report on the study that he's been conducting?"

"Yes."

The Scribe shook his head. "What was the subject of this very valuable book?"

"Language, sir."

"Language? You mean like one of the thousands of scholarly

tomes on the intricacies of the writings of the Middle Kingdom?"

"No, sir." The soft flesh of Scholar Li's face trembled. "This book is on a completely new subject: our language. The language of Korea."

The Scribe threw back his head and laughed. "But surely such a book has never been written. And if it was, who would be interested in such a thing? All writing and studying is done with the divine characters handed down through the millennia from the exalted Duke of Chou who established China, a great country compared to which we are just children. No one would be interested in such a book, and certainly no one would commit murder for such a book."

"The Great King was interested in such a book. He commissioned us to write it. And at the same time to devise a writing system for the language of Korea. A system that would suit us better than the cumbersome expropriation of Chinese characters."

The old Scribe stroked his beard. "It sounds foolish to me. But if the Great King commissioned it, there must be value in it somewhere."

Scholar Li bowed to the puzzled Scribe, trotted down the cobblestone pathway, through the gate, and followed the fading hoofbeats of the King's horsemen.

**O**ne of the soldiers surrounding the Hall of Maps and Books collared him as he walked up the stone steps.

"You're Scholar Li, aren't you?"

"Yes." Sweat ran down his face from the long run, and his eyes blinked in terror and discomfort from the sun glinting off the cruelly sharpened metal of the soldiers' swords and pikes.

"The Great King wants to see you."

Scholar Li was hustled into the cool darkness of the building, a few words were exchanged, and he was passed to a bigger, more burly man of senior rank. From there he was dragged through the familiar halls of the building he had worked in all these years until he was in the private study of the late Master Chong.

Sejong Daewang swiveled on the soles of his feet and spiked his large brown eyes into Scholar Li. "You may go," he said to the soldier without looking up, "and close to the door behind you."

The body of Master Chong lay at the King's feet. The opulence of the King's robes and the brilliantly studded belt that held his magnificently carved scabbard were stunning even to the un-

trained eye of Scholar Li. A knitted horsehair cap sat atop the King's wrinkled brow, enveloping his long black hair tied into shining knots.

"When did you find him dead?"

"Just this morning, Great King." Scholar Li knelt.

"No. Get up, get up. We must talk man to man if we are to solve this thing, eh?" Sejong Daewang placed a reassuring hand on Scholar Li. His trembling slowed down. A bit.

The King turned back to the corpse. The body of Master Chong was lying face down, his arms thrust forward as if he had been trying to break a fall. A great puddle of caked blood lay around his head.

The Great King knelt and pointed to the ruptured skin on the temple.

"A head wound," he said. "That's why it bled a lot." A few feet away lay a gnarled old stick, highly polished and varnished. The King picked it up and brought it to Scholar Li. "The walking stick of an old man. See the blood splattered here, on this knob? This is the weapon that killed Master Chong."

King Sejong's intellect was legendary. He was generally considered the most brilliant man to sit on the throne during the entire reign of the Yi Dynasty. But still Scholar Li's mind reeled at his capacity to deal with these worldly things and come up with logical conclusions. Of course, here in the Hall of Maps and Books, he and Master Chong had many times wrestled with knotty problems of scholarship and somehow managed to find their path through them. But that was in books. In elegantly crafted characters on thick paper pages, not at the site of a corpse. A corpse that was beginning to fill up this chamber with its foul aroma.

"Who were his visitors last night?"

"None, sire," Scholar Li said. "None that I know of. I was asleep in my room and heard nothing until I stumbled on Master Chong early this morning."

"What about the other scholars?"

"They are all gone, sir. Since the study has been completed, and the new writing system devised, they have returned to their homelands, which, as you know, are scattered all over the peninsula of Korea."

"And the servants?"

"Just a cook and a housekeeper. I will summon them."

The old cook and her husband, the housekeeper, were petrified

in the presence of the Great King. Gently he managed to calm them down and found that they too had heard nothing and that, as far as they knew, Master Chong had had no visitors last night.

After dismissing them, the King turned back to Scholar Li.

"Have you no guards?"

"None, sir. No one thought we would need them for such an insignificant enterprise."

The King's eyes flashed and Scholar Li realized his mistake.

"Not insignificant. I wouldn't have ordered it if it were insignificant. For centuries all the countries in the civilized world, that is, all those countries surrounding the Middle Kingdom, have been using the ancient Chinese characters as our script. You of all people, Scholar Li, should know that the Chinese language is very different from the Korean language, in grammar, pronunciation, and virtually all aspects. So the use of Chinese characters has been very clumsy for us Koreans." The King let his head droop and shook it slowly. "I remember my old tutor, the Venerable Oh. He spent many hours drilling me on the characters of the Middle Kingdom. Thousands of them. They are beautiful, truly beautiful, and logical and elegant—but so hard to use. It always struck me that if we could just devise a system that would signify the sounds of our speech, well, that would be so much easier than memorizing a completely new symbol for each word, a new symbol for each object, each action, each nuance of meaning that the human mind can devise.

"This would be especially useful in the Korean language, for there are many words we use for which no Chinese character exists. Of course, we've devised a few of our own, using the root symbols from other characters, but it has never quite worked out. In effect, in order to become literate, one must first learn the Chinese language. Our scholars have done very well in that. Some of the greatest writers and poets of all time have been Koreans, but I've always thought that we deserved our own means of expression. That's why I commissioned this study, Scholar Li."

"Yes, sir." Scholar Li bowed humbly.

"And the book? The results of all these years of effort? Where is it?"

"He kept it in that chest there, sir. But as you can see, it is gone."

"Have you no copies?"

"No, sir. Master Chong collated all the data gathered by the various scholars, wrote out the final linguistic reports, and delin-



eated the new written language, all in that single volume. It was just completed and we hadn't yet begun the work of transcribing it."

The Great King sank into thought. He looked dejected and worried, and Scholar Li marveled that one so rich and powerful could put so much stock into one book.

The Great King shook his head, rose from his chair, and strode back to the corpse. He knelt and examined everything once again, in minute detail.

Above Master Chong's right hand was some scratching, in blood, as if he had been clawing at the floor before he died.

"What is this, Scholar Li?" the King asked. "It looks like more than random tracings."

Scholar Li bent over and looked closely at the dried streaks of blood. He recognized them immediately. "Writing, sir. In the new language. *Hangul*."

"What does it say?"

Scholar Li knelt and looked more closely, straining to make it out. "I am not absolutely sure, sir. Master Chong was too busy to tutor us on all the aspects of his work, but I understand the principles. The individual letters of the new language actually represent the configurations taken by the tongue and the throat and the palate when uttering the various sounds the voice makes."

"Then what is this one? This first one here."

It was a horizontal line hooked up at the end.

"That would be the tongue, sir. And the turn upwards represents the tongue twisting up at its extremity to touch the roof of the mouth."

The King did it and forced air through his mouth. An "n" sound came out. "Yes, yes. Very clever. And this one?"

"The little circle here represents the open throat, sir. That is how all vowels are signified. The line here with an appendage rushing outward means that the throat should be open and air should rush out, straight forward."

The King tried it. An "ah" sound emitted from his throat. "Good, good. And what is this final one here on the bottom? It looks like a box."

"Yes, sir. That represents the lips as if they were pursed together, like a closed box."

The King tried it and a humming "m" sound emitted from his lips. "That's it. That's all of them. But what do they mean?"



"Put them together, sir. All together in one enunciation and they will sound out a word."

The King looked at him astonished, for just a second, as if he were mad. He looked back at the characters written in blood and sounded them out together. "Nam."

"Yes, sir. 'South.' Before he died Master Chong wrote out the word 'south.'"

"In his own blood."

"Yes, sir. In his own blood."

"How many of these little symbols that make sound are there?"

"Only twenty-eight, sir."

"Only twenty-eight?"

"Yes, sir."

"And with these twenty-eight you can express all the sounds of the Korean language?"

"Yes, sir. And any other human language for that matter."

"That means that with a few hours of study anyone could learn to read and write."

"Yes, sir. Exactly."

"Anyone could become a scholar."

"Anyone."

The Great King Sejong turned and strode out of the room, Scholar Li following at his heels. "Now I know why someone was willing to kill to get the book."

"Why is that, sir?"

"Because it will change the world."

**T**he King's horsemen forced everyone into their homes, and the foot soldiers searched each house one by one, from the Hall of Maps and Books to the Great South Gate in the wall surrounding the City of Seoul. The King, mounted on his great steed, directed the movements of the running troops and cavalry. Scholar Li stayed as close to the King as possible. The soldiers were in a frenzy, as only young armed men can be when ordered into the homes of the civil population. The screams of women and the cries of children permeated the air of the ancient capital.

The King stayed in constant motion, overseeing the action, making sure roadblocks were set up so no culprit with the sought-after manuscript could escape the area of search.

The afternoon grew long, and as the King's host approached the

Great South Gate, he rode in thought astride his great horse. He looked up as if asking for help from the gods, and then his eyes held steady, locked onto something.

Scholar Li followed his gaze. He was staring halfway up Namsan, the great South Mountain that presided over the outskirts of Seoul. The huge Monastery of Learning was there, where young men from wealthy families from all over the land of Korea came to study the ancient books, to learn the Confucian principles, and to emerge as superior men of education.

"Scholar Li!" the King bellowed. "Get on my horse. We ride!"

A soldier threw him up on the back of the King's steed, the horse reared, and they galloped through the Great South Gate and up the looming bulk of Namsan. Scholar Li had never been on a horse before and clawed at the King's robes, petrified that he might fall off and be trampled by the pounding hooves of the cavalry behind them.

The gates were pulled open long before they arrived, and the King and his troop galloped into the courtyard.

Scholar Li slipped off the horse and fought the urge to kiss the ground.

An old man, head shaven and blue robes flapping behind him, ran out into the courtyard and prostrated himself in front of the King.

"Where is your master," the King said, "the Venerable Oh?"

"He is here, oh Great King," the old man said, not daring to raise his head. "But he is very sick and has been for days and can barely move, so he sent this unworthy one to greet your exalted self."

The King dismounted and strode forward. "I would see the Venerable Oh."

The old man rose, backed up, and said, "Yessir, yessir," snapping his head back and forth like a starving woodpecker.

Scholar Li followed the King into the cool expansive chambers of the Monastery of Learning. It seemed that the King had been here before because he needed no guide to find his way through the winding halls.

He kicked a huge paper-paneled door and it fell forward with a crash. There, on a large dais, as serene as a lotus in a pond, sat the Venerable Oh. The king halved the large hall in three swift strides.

"The book, oh evil one, the book!"

The man showed no fear of the King and all his soldiers. Only

Scholar Li trembled behind the Great King.

The Venerable Oh, his legs still crossed beneath him, bowed slowly at the waist. "So, Great King, this old man makes the same mistake again. Underestimating the greatest student he ever had. Was it the cane?"

"No, no. Of course not. There are many old men in this great city who need the assistance of a walking cane, but there is only one man in this entire Kingdom who would realize the value of the book."

"Besides yourself, Little One."

"Don't call me fond names, old man. Those times are past. Change is upon us, and no one can stop it."

"Ah, yes," the Venerable Oh said. "So impatient. Always so impatient."

"The book, old man. The book!"

"Won't you humor an old man, your former teacher, for just a moment?"

The Venerable One pulled a huge volume out of a small cabinet and plopped it on the writing table in front of him.

Scholar Li started. It was the manuscript of Master Chong.

The Venerable Oh thumbed through the manuscript and lifted a long horsehair brush from the inkwell on the writing desk. "I have been making some notations in the margins. For improvements, you understand. All in all, it is a masterful piece of work, and Master Chong should be greatly admired for his outstanding scholarship." He made a deft mark in the book. The handle of the brush was long and pointed and appeared to be made of an exquisite jade that seemed almost translucent in the soft glow of the lamp-light.

"He has done it. He has really done it. He has created a written language that anyone can learn in just a few hours. With this, all manner of uneducated persons will be able to write out rough reports. But they will be without elegance, without scope, without resonance. Just simple narratives on the day to day happenings of their lives, gossip, all the basest, untutored sorts of things that are the basis for common discourse. It will expose the people to a flood of ill-considered manifestos with no guarantee that the person enunciating them will be, in any way, through virtue or education, a superior person.

"Criminals could use this language to plot their exploits, merchants to design their business dealings and lovers to plan their

vile assignations. Even children could learn this language. Or women!

"I beseech you to listen to this old man, oh Great King. What is a written language without learning to come before it? It is a danger. It is a ruin to our nation and a ruin to our civilization. That is why I had to destroy the learned Master Chong. To destroy his dangerous knowledge, and now only this volume stands between us and ruin. I should have burned it. But even though it is dangerous, it is still a thing of true scholarship and therefore a thing of beauty, so I could not destroy it."

"And yet you could destroy Master Chong!" The King's voice cracked like a whip.

The Venerable Oh sat up, startled, for even a King did not speak to his old teacher in such a voice. "But he was dangerous. He had to die."

"It is you who are dangerous, old man. Seize the book!"

A soldier stepped forward. The Venerable Oh stood up. "Beware of this new world you create, young Sejong. It will have dangers and horrors you can scarcely imagine. Go bravely into it. I will not enter with you."

With that the Venerable Oh thrust open his robes, lifted his long jade writing brush, and pierced the flesh beneath his breastbone, pushing the blade up into his heart. His eyes rolled and he fell forward onto the manuscript as his life's blood rushed onto the crisp paper pages.

The soldier rolled his body aside and lifted the book, letting most of the blood drip to the floor. He carried the manuscript with both hands, presented it to the King, and bowed.

Sejong Daewang's face was a frozen thing. He held the book for a moment and then thrust it at Scholar Li.

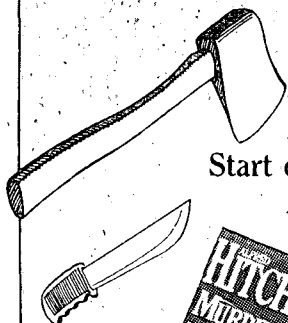
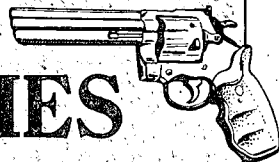
"Clean it, Scholar Li, and be sure not to lose one word or your blood will be added to its pages."

Back at the Hall of Maps and Books, dabbing carefully at the blood-splattered pages, Scholar Li noticed the inscriptions made in the margin by the Venerable Oh. Three elegantly crafted Chinese characters.

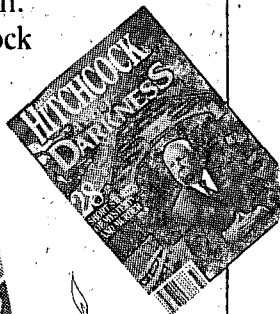
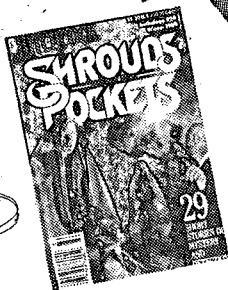
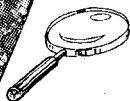
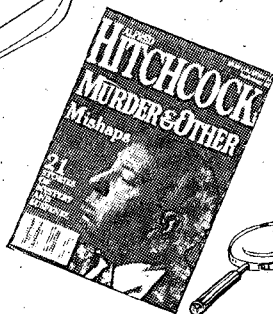
He could translate it into Korean in two ways: "From Knowledge Flows Blood" or "From Blood Flows Knowledge."

Vague. Inscrutable. But that was the old way.

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# The Last Crime Story

by Robert Loy

*When a man undertakes to create something, he establishes a new heaven, as it were, and from it the work that he desires to create flows into him. For such is the immensity of man that he is greater than heaven and earth.*

PHILIPPUS AUREOLUS PARACELSUS

**T**he moral of this story is that IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO BELIEVE IN SOMETHING, AND VITAL TO KNOW JUST EXACTLY WHAT IT IS YOU BELIEVE IN.

I'm placing the moral at the beginning of this tale rather than at its more customary encampment in the rearmost sector because it has come to my attention that some of you people out there select which stories you're going to read in this magazine by skimming through the first three paragraphs and then either continuing on



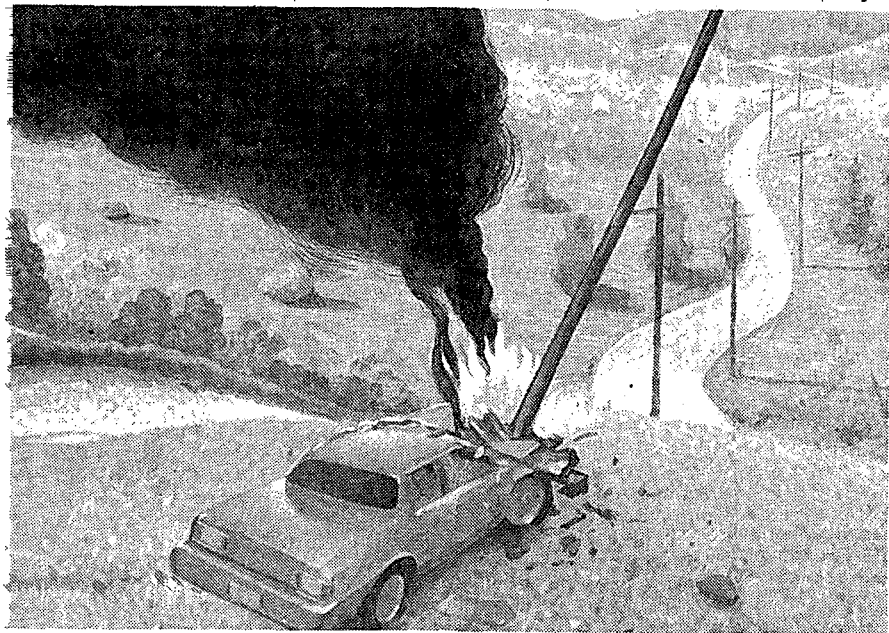
Illustration by Mark Fresh



if that paltry prose sample strikes your fancy or skipping over to the next, hopefully-more-instantly-compelling story if it does not. (This puts a tremendous burden on the author, who must sacrifice his vision of the intrinsic artistic structure of his piece just so he or she can grab potential readers by the vitals in the first two hundred fifty words or so, but I won't go into that here except to say I sincerely hope you people out there appreciate all this trouble we put ourselves through for you.) The point is, I want everybody—even the finicky and the slovenly readers among your number—to hear at least the moral of this story. It's that important. (That, of course, is also why I violated some more rules and wrote the moral all in capital letters—"all caps," as we in the business say.)

Okay, here we go: Norman Novellis had a heart attack on Friday. It perhaps might not have been a fatal one had he not lost control of his Buick Skylark and crashed into a telephone pole. As it was, he was killed instantly.

(How's that? Compelling enough? I tried to work a little sex into this scene of violence and death, but it just couldn't be done. Sorry.





I'll try to throw in some gratuitously a little later—I know how you guys love that stuff.)

I'm getting ahead of myself, I realize. You don't even know who Norman Novellis was, do you? But, you see, I still have not shaken those three-paragraph phantoms. I'm still playing by their rules, still trying to hook readers by the third paragraph. That, of course, is why I broke the rules of good writing once again and made my second paragraph so run-on and unwieldy, just so I could get the violence and death in by this reader-enforced deadline. The moral will be a lot more meaningful to these people if they can get it in context, with all the illustrations and symbols that I have racked my brain here in my lonely ill-lit study to come up with, and intend to use to support this thesis of mine (see the first paragraph if you've forgotten the thesis). I ask the indulgence of the more diligent readers out there, those of you who read each story from beginning to end before deciding if the work a stranger poured his heart out on to entertain and enlighten you with is worth your time. Bless you, all shall be revealed.

Perhaps I can best explain who Norman Novellis was by explaining what he wasn't. He was not a believer—in anything. (That he knew of.) He did not believe in Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, Bhagawan Shree Rajneesh, Reverend Moon, or Shirley MacLaine. He did not believe in capitalism, communism, socialism, or any of the other isms man inflicts upon himself. He did not believe in philosophy, theology, Scientology, evolution, creationism, the big bang, abortion, or right-to-life. He had never even believed in Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, the tooth fairy, or the boogeyman.

He called himself a nihilist, but he was really just a cynic. There's a difference. Nihilists believe in nothing, but Norman Novellis did not believe in anything—again, anything that he knew of; actually, as we shall see, it is impossible not to believe in something, but we're getting ahead of ourselves again.

As an example of the difference between nihilism and cynicism: If a competent physician told a nihilist that his lifestyle was killing him and he'd better change his eating and exercise habits or get ready for a massive heart attack, the nihilist would probably pull that dusty old exercise bicycle out of the attic and start pumping it for all he was worth. No doubt he would also immediately cut down on—if not cut out entirely—red meat, butter, sour cream, and all that good stuff. DIET, THAT'S THE MAIN KEY TO PRE-

VENTING HEART DISEASE. (We're having a special on morals today—buy one, get one free.)

But Norman Novellis was such a cynic he did not even believe in oat bran, the erstwhile manna of our era.

And when Norman Novellis's physician told him he was cruising for a coronary, he laughed in her face.

"Don't hand me that stuff," he told his physician. "All that cholesterol jazz is just an AMA conspiracy to deprive people of whatever *joie de vivre* they might possibly be able to wring out of their sordid little existences. It's the same thing you guys have always done. Whether it's leeches or radiation 'therapy,' you guys are always the spoilsports of life."

"All I'm saying, Mr. Novellis, is that your arteries are clogged with cholesterol. You need to make a few changes in the way you've been eating. Specifically I want you to cut down on saturated fat and alcohol and try to get more soluble fiber into your diet. Also, I want you to try to exercise a little, three times a week or so. Otherwise your life may very well be shortened. Considerably."

"Hey, if I don't have long to live, then I damn sure don't want to spend what time I have eating sellable fabric or whatever it is—the doctorese term for horse chow—and jumping and jogging around with no destination. Why should I deny myself the few simple, basic pleasures of life, doc, when I might step outside your office here and get run over by a bus, or be stabbed to death in my sleep tonight by Lebanese terrorists? Sell it to some other gullible fool."

Here the physician lost some of her temper—not all of it, but some.

"Well, you'll be singing a different song before long is all I can say. When that pain in your chest comes, and it feels like a big muscle has just ripped right in two, you'll be thinking, 'God, I wish I hadn't been so hard-headed. I wish I'd done something to prevent this while there was still time.'"

But this physician, although she was absolutely right about the congested condition of Norman Novellis's capillaries, was not a seeress.

When the pain in Norman Novellis's chest struck him and he knew, though he hadn't felt one before and wasn't expecting it now, that it was a heart attack, knew that it was going to kill him, his last earthly thoughts were not on the texture of his skull. Nor was his mind filled with regret over sins of omission.

What he actually thought was, "Damn. Why did this have to happen on the way *home* from work—on a Friday! Right before a bowling weekend. I guess this means no pizza and beer with the guys tonight."

And it was truer than he knew.

For Norman Novellis had ingested his last anchovy, consumed his last Coors, avoided his last aerobic workout.

As I said before (though I didn't really want to, I prefer to have these little tales of mine emulate life as much as possible and give you folks these events in chronological order), this was not a massive coronary, but Norman Novellis lost control of his Buick Skylark and smacked into a telephone pole, and that was the end of his earthly existence.

But it is just the beginning of this story.

(Actually, it's more like an allegory, but let's just call it a story. Keep things as simple as possible. Matters are going to get complicated enough on their own very shortly.)

**A**s you probably expected, Norman Novellis did not believe in an afterlife. So just opening his eyes again at all after he knew he was dead (and believe me, you know when you're dead, you always do. Regardless of what you may have read or heard, nobody is unaware of what is happening, nobody thinks they're dreaming or anything. They know.), was a tremendous shock.

Opening them to see a man with a burlap face and painted-on eyes and mouth and to hear the man ask him if he was all right was so astonishing he passed out again.

Understandably, he was still a little weak from his recent traumatic experience. And perhaps this is as good a time as any to point out that had Norman Novellis been a fundamentalist Christian he would right now be opening his eyes to robe-clad, harp-playing, halo-topped, hymn-singing cloud hoppers. Had he been a Hindu, he would be reviewing his life and preparing for his next incarnation. Had he been a Viking (unlikely in this day and age, I realize, but bear with me. I'm trying to prove a point here), he would wake up with a sword in one hand, a horn of mead in the other, and a slew of monsters and giants to slay in Valhalla, the happy hunting ground of the Norsemen. If he was L. Frank Baum or Dorothy Gale, he'd be exactly where he was now. (Intriguing, huh?) Had he been a true nihilist—pay attention; this is where it

starts to get tricky, because nihilists believe in nothing, but nothing is the only thing that really *doesn't* exist. Nihilists believe that after they die they're just dead and that's it. Unfortunately, that's not possible, so nihilists go off to a dark, quiet corner of the universe where they can lie around with their eyes closed and think they're dead. They're not really dead, of course. They could get up and walk around if they wanted to, play a little handball, take in a movie or a show, even get out and try to hunt up a happier hereafter, but they don't believe they can so the effect is much the same as if they actually couldn't.

(If you're not sure you caught all that, you need to back up and reread it. The rest of us will wait here for you. It's important that you not get behind or you're going to be completely lost when we start building on what we've already learned.)

The main point (so far) is this: What you believe is going to happen to you after you die (as well as what happens to you while you live, but that's another allegory) is pretty much what does happen to you. If you honestly believe that after you die you will wind up screaming and crying in brimstone-scented flames while a cloven-footed beast with horns and a sharp tail prods you with a pitchfork, this is precisely what will happen. You will not be disappointed.

But Norman Novellis was not a Christian or a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Viking or a nihilist, so he couldn't go to any of the more popular promised lands. Where did he go? What happens to you if you don't believe anything is going to happen to you?

When Norman Novellis came to, the burlap man was still there.

"I would ask you if you were all right," said the burlap-faced man, "but it seems that question makes you faint. So, how about: 'Hello, friend. How are you today?' Do you like that question any better?"

And he smiled.

But how can he smile? Norman Novellis wondered. His face is painted on.

"I said, 'Hello, friend. How are you today?' "

Norman Novellis sat up and looked at this man. He was dressed in rags and had straw sticking out of his chest, gloves, boots, and neck.

Oh, my god, thought Norman Novellis, this guy's a scarecrow. I've lost my mind.

"Where am I?" Norman Novellis asked the straw man. (You've

noticed, no doubt, that he is completely ignoring the scarecrow's question. Cynics are often rude like that.) "And why aren't I dead?"

"Hmmm," said the Scarecrow as he scratched his head (which being filled with straw probably itched quite a bit). "That's a toughie—not your first question, that's simple; you're in the Emerald City of Oz, more specifically in Princess Ozma's rose garden. But as to why you're not dead, I must say that even with my magnificent mind I can't figure that one—"

"Wait a minute. Where did you say I am?"

"You're in Ozma's rose garden."

"In Oz?"

"Well, of course, where else would Ozma's rose garden be but in Oz? I mean, think about it for a minute. Why would Ozma plant her—"

The Scarecrow kept on talking, but Norman Novellis wasn't listening. He put his right hand on his chest and felt his heartbeat clear and strong. Clearer and stronger than it had been since he was a teenager.

He stood up. Everything—the trees, the grass, the sky, the roses—was greener or bluer or redder, as the case may be, and sharper somehow than he had ever seen trees and grass and sky and roses look since he was a child. And the air was so fresh—fresher than he had ever felt in his life. You could actually taste the air, and it tasted great.

You might think that Norman Novellis is taking all this incredibly calmly. You might even be starting to doubt my abilities as a belletrist (a fancy word for writer; I love fancy words) and think that Norman Novellis's reactions are unrealistic, unbelievable. Maybe you think that if you all of a sudden landed in a place you had always assumed was nothing more than a fairytale land, you'd exhibit a bit more hysteria than Norman Novellis is demonstrating. But the truth is you don't know. I mean, after all, you've never been dead, so how you're going to react to it when it happens is a mystery, isn't it?

(And really, there is one thing you have to give cynics, and that is that they adjust to changes—even rapid future-shock-like changes—remarkably well, much better than optimists. Norman Novellis figured if he was in Oz, then he was in Oz. He could worry about the whys and wherefores later, now he had something more important on his mind.)

"Tell me something," Norman Novellis said to the Scarecrow, "what do people eat here in Oz?"

"Eat? Why, whatever they want, as much as they want, whenever they want."

"Anything they want?"

"Sure. Hot dogs, cupcakes, pizza, double fudge chocolate brownies with whipped cream. Anything."

"No oat bran?"

"Sure, you want oat bran, you can have oat bran."

"I don't want it."

The Scarecrow wasn't used to people inquiring about foodstuffs they *didn't* want to eat. He had to think for a minute before he answered. (Contrary to what MGM led you to believe, the wizard actually did give the Scarecrow a brain, and a very brilliant brain it is, too.)

"Well, if you don't want it, don't eat it. You don't have to eat anything you don't want to eat. And me, I don't have to eat anything at all. I'm made out of straw, not meat, so I don't have to eat—or sleep, for that matter. Nick Chopper and Jack Pumpkinhead are the same way—well, they're not made out of straw, but they don't have to sleep is what I meant. We have some of our best conversations late at night, early in the morning when everyone else is asleep, and we don't have to interrupt our talk to fill our mouths with popcorn or potato chips or—"

"I suppose you guys talk about philosophy and religion and politics and all that kind of stuff."

(Norman Novellis hated philosophical and religious discussions. "A waste of perfectly good oxygen," he called them.)

"No," said the Scarecrow, "mostly we talk about different adventures and fun times we've had, and places we haven't been and things we haven't done but would like to see and do someday."

Only now did it really start to sink in on Norman Novellis that he wasn't in Kansas any more (so to speak). It started to sink in and it felt wonderful. Somehow Norman Novellis had landed in Paradise, a much cooler paradise than the boring heaven his mother and father and other born-again do-gooders had tried to get him interested in during his earth life. He closed his eyes and let the sensation of living permanently in Paradise pervade his spirit.

"So what do you do?" he asked the Scarecrow, several minutes later.

"Oh, I do lots of things," the Scarecrow said. "I think about lots of different things. I dance—generally, if I'm not thinking, I'm dancing." And here the Scarecrow stood up and did a few loose-jointed charleston steps to demonstrate his terpsichorean (yes, fancy word) talents. "And I read a little, write a little—"

"No, I mean, what do you do for a living? What is your job?"

"Oh, I don't have a job. No one in Oz has a job—unless of course he really wants one."

Now Norman Novellis threw back his head and laughed. He had hated his job even more than he hated philosophical discussions. He didn't know how he got here to Oz, and he didn't really care. He only knew it was the most peaceful, the most perfect place he had ever seen—or even dreamed about (Not that that's saying much. Cynics' dreams tend to be depressingly prosaic.), and he wanted nothing more than to live here forever.

"This Oz sounds like quite a place."

"Oh, it's great. There's no crime, no disease, no pollution, people never get any older. We have Christmas every month, and it only rains at night here and then only so the children will have mud puddles to play in. You're going to love it here."

"You mean I can stay?"

"Oh, well, I guess so." The Scarecrow appeared momentarily puzzled. "I mean, that's not really up to me. Princess Ozma will have to decide about that."

"Who is this prin—"

But just then a horse pulled up—only it wasn't a horse like Norman Novellis was used to; it wasn't a meat horse, as the Scarecrow would say. It was a wooden sawhorse, but it galloped just like a real horse and it carried a coach all by itself, just as a real horse might do if it were incredibly stronger than the average horse. The only thing the sawhorse did that other horses don't do is talk.

"Princess Ozma sent for you, friend stranger," said the knotholed nag. "Hop in."

But Norman Novellis did not immediately hop.

"How did this Ozma person know I was here? Was she expecting me?" he asked the lumbering beast. ("Lumbering," get it? A wooden horse—lumbering. Usually we authors ruthlessly redline all extraneous literary frivolities such as puns. Particularly puns. We don't do it because we want to, but because every editor in the world believes that you guys, the readers, find anything that does



not directly advance the plot confusing. Personally, I think you're all a lot more intelligent than that, but try telling that—or anything else, for that matter—to an editor. Anyway, you people have no idea how much this hurts us. All authors love puns more than we love our own children, and just to uproot them from a manuscript and—well, I'm leaving that one in. It adds nothing to the story, but I'm leaving it in. As an experiment. I want to see if Western literature implodes as a result.)

"No," answered the sawhorse, "but she has a magic mirror in which she can see everything that happens in Oz as it happens. And she saw you land here in her rose garden."

"Oh, okay. I see," he answered absently.

Norman Novellis answered absently not because he was thinking, as a more logical, linear-deductive man might be at this moment, What? A magic mirror? Nothing doing, that is scientifically impossible. No, Norman Novellis was thinking, Gee, a magic mirror. Maybe sometimes when this Ozma person isn't looking I can borrow it and check out what's going on the University of Oz girls' locker room.

(See what I mean about cynics adjusting rapidly?)

He hopped in the carriage. So did the Scarecrow.

"I'll point out some of the sights to you on the way," the cornfield custodian said to Norman Novellis.

And what wondrous sights there were, too. Rolling meadows, brooks that actually babbled, beautiful women everywhere; rainbows with real pots of gold at the end, plants and animals and colors that Norman Novellis had never seen and had no adjectives with which to describe them to himself. All he could do was sit back breathless and try to absorb all this wonder and beauty.

Truly, this is heaven, thought Norman Novellis.

And here he shed a tear of joy. (I know, I know, cynics don't shed tears of joy. But Oz can do strange things to a man. Besides, I'm telling this story, and if I say he shed a tear of joy, he shed a tear of joy.)

The only unpleasant thing at all he witnessed on their journey was a small blue man stepping out of an alley, conking another small blue man on the head with an umbrella, and lifting his wallet. Norman Novellis started to point this out to the Scarecrow, who had not seen it, and ask him how it jibed with his assertion that there was no crime in Oz. (Cynics love to catch other people's

misstatements and rub their noses, even painted-on noses, in them.)

But Norman Novellis was already feeling less cynical by the minute, and he figured why spoil the magic?

Unfortunately, Ozma was called away on an emergency (there was a bank robbery in the Gilliken country north of the Emerald City) before she could meet with Norman Novellis, and he was taken directly to his new home, a cottage in the Munchkin country, which is east of the Emerald City.

Unlike what the 1939 MGM motion picture classic *The Wizard of Oz* (which Norman, like most cynics, despised) had led him to believe, the Munchkins were not abnormally small, certainly not midgets. They were about the size of the average Japanese. And that suited Norman Novellis just fine because he was a little on the short side himself.

In fact, nearly everything about his new neighborhood suited Norman Novellis just fine. There were only a couple of things wrong with Munchkinland, and they were so trivial that they did not at all detract from Ozheaven (as Norman Novellis now mentally referred to his new home). One was that the Munchkins all wore blue—all day, every day. It was the only color of clothing—the only color of fabric—available in stores. (Now that is just a loose end. I'm not going to explain why the Munchkins all wear blue, nor does their inclination toward indigo have anything to do with what happens from here on in. As an author, you're not supposed to do that. In fiction, as we've discussed before, if it doesn't advance the plot, out it goes. Again, because editors don't think you're smart enough to handle it. Insulting, is it not? You ought to get down on your knees every night and thank Whoever, or whoever, it is you think deserves the credit or blame for your reality, that you've got us authors in the trenches, fighting—at a ridiculously low, few-pennies-per-word wage rate, I might add—every day for your right to quality literature. There are supposed to be no loose ends, no meaningless events—which is why fiction is not, and will never be, realistic. Real life—real life on earth anyway—is mostly loose ends.)

And every once in a while there was a pocket-picking or an aggravated assault or a trademark infringement to break up the joyful monotony of good news. One night Norman Novellis returned

home from a party to find that his cottage had been broken into and entered—robbed.

But this did not upset Norman Novellis a great deal, partly because he had consumed a great deal of Munchkin wine at the party, but mostly because it's easy to replace your possessions in a country that doesn't use money and where everything you need is free for the asking.

Besides, there wasn't nearly as much crime here as there was back in Texas. (Oh, did I not mention that Norman Novellis was from the Lone Star State—Fort Worth, to be specific? Well, it doesn't matter, he could be from anywhere. In fact, it's probably better if you don't think of him as having come from anywhere more specific than earth. After all, Norman Novellis is a symbol, remember.)

But the Scarecrow had said there was *no* crime. What can he have been thinking of, Norman Novellis wondered.

Norman Novellis settled into his new lifestyle with no problem whatsoever. Mornings he read the newspaper—the *Munchkin Monitor*—from cover to cover, a luxury he never had time for back on earth. Afternoons were spent exploring the other areas of his new homeland, the Winkie country to the west of the Emerald City, the aforementioned Gilliken country, and the delightfully balmy (though all of Oz is quite temperate) southern land of the Quadlings.

Evenings were when Norman Novellis socialized with his friends—and he had lots of them. It's impossible not to make friends in Oz. Everyone there is so open, so giving—so friendly.

Ironically, Norman Novellis's best friend in Oz was probably Nick Chopper, the Tin Woodman. (I know his name was not given in the movie, but take my word for it, it's Nick Chopper.) I say ironic because Nick Chopper has to be the least cynical guy in all the vast realms of creation. I mean, here's a guy who travels many miles, tangles with flying monkeys, humbug wizards, wicked witches just to get a heart. If Norman Novellis had been born without a heart, he would not have gone to that much trouble. He would have just gotten used to it. (I know, I know, if he had been born without a heart, he wouldn't do anything, he'd be stillborn—on earth. But we left earth several paragraphs ago. Keep up—we're taking the cosmic view here and it's going to get even more cosmic before we're finished.)

Norman Novellis used to have long talks with his friend Nick

Chopper. Nick had a theory about how it was that Norman Novellis ended up in Oz. Everybody knew (that is, everybody in Oz knew) that you go where you believe you're going to go. Nick further postulated that people like Norman Novellis who didn't believe they were going anywhere ("The only place people can't go is nowhere," Nick reasoned. "Even if you take off without a map or a compass you're still going to wind up *somewhere*. It might not be where you want to go, but it won't be nowhere."), just sort of take pot luck and end up in some random place.

"Maybe whatever gods or goddesses are in charge of that sort of thing just close their eyes and more or less toss you out somewhere, off into creation," Nick told Norman Novellis.

I guess I can go ahead and tell you here that Nick's theory is essentially correct. Although the beings—actually, a computer now—in charge of assigning nonbelievers to their final rewards don't close their eyes and toss anybody. It's more of a turn-taking type of process. But Nick was right in that it's pretty much a crapshoot where you're going to end up if you don't know what it is you believe in. Every supposedly fictitious realm (I say supposedly-fictitious because there is truly no such thing as a fictitious realm. Every place from heaven to Mayberry to Never-never land is real if somebody believes in it, even if it's only the man or woman who invented it. Therefore, every place anyone has ever thought about is real, also every person, every animal, every thing, but I don't want to overload your minds with too much too fast, anyway, every supposedly fictitious realm takes turns offering sanctuary to these orphans of faith like Norman Novellis. It just happened to be Oz's turn when Norman Novellis ran into that telephone pole back in paragraph three.

Nick's theory chilled Norman Novellis to the bone (and he didn't even know it was true).

Why, just think, he thought. I might have ended up in Wonderland and have to worry about getting my head chopped off—or been sent to Lake Wobegon and be bored to death—or, geez! Dante's inferno. (And Norman Novellis was right to be chilled. The mind of man has created many heavens and many earths, but not many—well, why mince words? None of them is as nice as Oz.)

Norman Novellis told Nick about his former home, about earth and its peoples and its customs. Nick, of course, tried, as all Oz-mopolitans try at all times, to be polite and positive, but he couldn't help but remark that earth sounded pretty hellish.

Norman Novellis had to agree.

And then one day Norman Novellis was summoned before Princess Ozma (full title *Her Royal Highness, the Eminent Empress, Princess Ozma the First and Only of Oz, Beloved and Benevolent Ruler of all the Myriad Mysterious Places and Peoples East of the Deadly Desert and West of the Shifting Sands*). The Cowardly Lion escorted him, and when they reached the palace, a structure so much more magnificent than anything on earth I'm not going to insult it by even trying to describe it (Hey, why don't you do it? I shouldn't have to take you by the hand and point out everything for you. It's time you readers started standing on your own two feet and helping out a little in this creative process. Oh, all right, since you're used to being babied, I'll help you out a little. Just imagine the most breathtaking, incredible castle you've ever dreamed, something that makes the Taj Mahal look like an outhouse, a fortress where everything from the foundation to the finial is made of precious jewels and metals. Then multiply it by ten.), he was grabbed by guards and tied up with some kind of rope made out of green light. Some kind of escape-proof, very tight rope made out of green light.

"Hey, what's going on here? What's the meaning of this?"

A tall, imposing, but breathtakingly beautiful woman stepped out from the shadows. No doubt you're curious as to what she looks like, but again I don't feel qualified to do the descriptions here (And no, I'm not copping out. I heard you there in the back row, and believe me, if you'd ever laid eyes on this lady you'd be at a loss for modifiers too, wise guy.) so I'm going to let somebody who has actually seen her describe her to you:

"No one knows her age, but all can see how beautiful and stately she is. Her hair is like red gold and finer than the finest silken strands. Her eyes are as blue as the sky. Her cheeks are the envy of peach-blows and her mouth is as enticing as a rosebud. She wears no jewelry, for her beauty would shame them."

(No, I'm not sure what a peach-blow is either, but I think you get the idea.)

(And by the way, I am quoting from L. Frank Baum, who invented this heaven when he wrote *The Wizard of Oz*, as well as thirteen other books on this wonderful country. If you thought there was only one, you probably spend more time watching television than you do reading, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself.)

I probably should say right here that this is *not* Princess Ozma. This is Glinda, the *Good Witch and Official Sorceress of the Kingdom of Oz*. Princess Ozma could not see Norman Novellis (except in her magic mirror) and Norman Novellis could not see her at all. (Which was really Norman Novellis's loss, since if you think Glinda is a knockout . . .) The reason is that all Norman Novellis knew of Oz was from the movie, and Ozma was not in the movie. (Actually she was in it briefly, but you wouldn't have recognized her. It was during a period in her life when she'd been turned into a boy. Yes, life does sometimes get complicated in Oz.) Norman Novellis could not see Ozma because he did not believe in Ozma. (Of course, he did not, prior to his death, believe in the Scarecrow, Nick Chopper, the Cowardly Lion, or Glinda either. But he did believe they were characters in the story.)

"The meaning of this, Norman Novellis, is that you must leave Oz." Her voice was lilting and beautiful (One of the few things the movie did get right was Glinda's voice. She sounds exactly like Billie Burke.), but the words turned Norman Novellis's blood to slush. "And you must leave Oz now."

"But I don't want to leave Oz. I like it here," said Norman Novellis.

"I realize that," said Glinda, raising her magic wand gracefully but distinctly menacingly, "and if there was any way to arrange things so that you could stay I would do that for you, but there is not. You must go."

"But where are you going to send me?" Norman Novellis asked, trying to keep down the hysteria in his voice. He was not adjusting well now.

"Your destination is a mystery to me. People in Oz do not die, but I am sending you to one of the countless hereafters they might end up in if they did die. More than that, I cannot say. This inter-reality magic thing is still in its infancy."

"But you can't do that. You can't just kick me out of here for no reason."

Glinda put the wand down on a nearby table. She didn't let go of it, but she set it down.

"It's not without reason, Mr. Novellis. You have brought crime to Oz. The crime must stop. The crime will not stop as long as you are here. Therefore you must go."

"Wait a minute! How do you figure I'm responsible for the crime?"

"Prior to your arrival there was no crime. Now there is."

"Well, all right, so it started when I got here. It's a coincidence. It's got to be a coincidence. I'm not a crook. I haven't stolen anything since that bottle of Dad's Wild Turkey when I was in the eleventh grade. Surely you're not going to deport me for that. So how—"

"I have given you the benefit of the doubt for quite a long time, Mr. Novellis, but I'm afraid there is no longer any doubt for you to benefit from. I've done some research on this phenomenon, and while there is not time for me to explain all to you in any detail, I can simplify it by saying that you come from one of the few realms where there is such a thing as crime, and when you came to Oz you brought this criminality with you as ideological baggage. In some realms this would not be a problem, but here in Oz I am afraid it is intolerable. In other words, Mr. Novellis, you are not being deported because you are a criminal. You're being deported because you believe in crime."

"Not me, sister. I don't—I mean, I didn't—believe in crime. I don't believe in anything." Which was even more untrue now than it was when he was on earth. The truth is, Norman Novellis had recently come to believe in a whole lot of things—chief among them that Oz was where he wanted to spend eternity—but he had not examined his belief system in some time (see paragraph one, if you think that's a good idea) and he was denying belief in anything out of long-ingrained habit.

Glinda let go of the wand and put the palms of her hands lightly together. Norman Novellis breathed for the first time since being summoned there.

"Let me ask you one question, Mr. Novellis," said the Good Witch and Official Sorceress of the Kingdom of Oz. "Do you believe it is possible to get away with murder?"

Norman Novellis squirmed in his green-light ropes and said, "Literally or figuratively?"

(He was stalling while he tried to figure out what it was Glinda wanted to hear.)

"Either way," answered Glinda.

Well, thought Norman Novellis, she didn't ask me if I thought murder was okay. She asked me if I thought it was possible to get away with it, and everybody knows you can—even though it's wrong. So, trying his best not to sound cynical, Norman Novellis said:

"Sure, people do it every day."

"Then you believe in crime. Some of your beliefs have leaked



out" (This is another complicated concept, but you've noticed how Norman Novellis has gotten less cynical just by being around Oz people. Well, the process works in reverse too.), "and now there is crime in Oz. You must go, Norman Novellis."

(Actually, Norman Novellis had brought a whole bunch of other nasty things to Oz with him as ideological baggage—things like disease, death, religion, hemorrhoids, tabloid television, old age, greed, lust, the concept of condom humor, and other various and assorted aberrations that we here on earth accept as normal but were previously unknown in Oz. But I'm mentioning only crime here because crime is probably the worst thing he brought, and because this is a mystery magazine; it concerns itself primarily with crime. Therefore I have to play up the crime aspect of this story, and downplay other aspects, such as characterization. This, by the way, is called slanting, and it's just another of those things that we inkstained wretches do for you guys that you probably do not appreciate even slightly.)

Glinda picked up the wand.

"No, wait!" Norman Novellis screamed. "Wait! Didn't Oz have witches that kidnapped and tried to kill Dorothy and who sent their flying monkeys out to tear up the Scarecrow? Yes, I know you did, Nick told me about it. There, that's assault, attempted murder, kidnapping, God knows what all else. All before I got here."

Norman Novellis let out a soft "Whew!" He actually thought he was off the hook now. But Glinda pooh-poohed his argument with an airy wave of her hand.

"The witches did what they did because they wanted power," Glinda explained, "so their actions, Mr. Novellis, were essentially political. And politics, while it resembles crime in many regards, is not precisely the same thing."

Glinda never lost her patience, but she was anxious to get this over with. Every minute Norman Novellis stayed in Oz the concept of criminality became more deeply embedded in the minds of her fellow Ozmopolitans.

She raised the wand.

"But look," Norman Novellis continued to protest, "if you send me off somewhere, God only knows where, you could be sending me to hell or someplace worse. Isn't that a crime? Doesn't that make you a criminal?"

"Oz has always had strict immigration policies. After all, we're not a democracy. We're a utopia."

"Then send me back to Texas," pleaded Norman Novellis, "don't zap me with that thing that you don't know what it's going to do to me. Send me back to Texas. Please, please!"

"I can't do that, Mr. Novellis."

"Yes, you can." Nick Chopper had told Norman Novellis about Ozma's magic belt which could send people anywhere she wanted them to go, and Norman Novellis was still under the impression that this was Ozma he was talking to.

"Perhaps I did not phrase that well, Mr. Novellis," said Glinda. "I could indeed *send* you back to Texas. But you cannot *go* back to Texas."

"But why not?"

"Because nobody in Texas *believes* that you can come back.

"Now, goodbye, Mr. Novellis." Glinda intoned some magic words, waved the magic wand, and Norman Novellis screamed and vanished.

Well, no, he didn't really vanish. Norman Novellis went *somewhere*—to some other hereafter. I don't know which one, and I wouldn't tell you if I did. But as we've already ascertained, none of them is as pleasant as Oz.

(No, hang on a minute here, that doesn't sound nearly forceful enough. I don't think it brings home the horror of not knowing what you believe in in as graphic and unforgettable a manner as I had in mind when I sat down to write this thing. I damn sure don't want to let you guys slip off the hook right when we're getting to the end, so let me back up and try it again.)

Well, no, he didn't really vanish. Norman Novellis was sent to a planet where people with two eyes were considered freakish aberrations and were tortured unmercifully, unspeakably, thirty-nine hours a day, sixty-six days a week. A planet that had no concept of death, so there was no chance of escaping to another hereafter.

(Yeah, that's much better.)

And that was the end of Norman Novellis—as far as we're concerned. We leave him in a place that makes hell look like Disneyland. And remember, Norman Novellis is there not because he didn't believe in anything, but because HE DID NOT KNOW WHAT IT WAS HE BELIEVED IN UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE.

(See? I told you it was dangerous.)

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The House in Goblin Wood

by John  
Dickson Carr

**I**n Pall Mall, that hot July afternoon three years before the war, an open saloon car was drawn up to the curb just opposite the Senior Conservatives' Club.

And in the car sat two conspirators.

It was the drowsy post-lunch hour among the clubs, where only the sun remained brilliant. The Rag lay somnolent; the Athenaeum slept outright. But these two conspirators, a dark-haired young man in his early thirties and a fair-haired girl perhaps half a dozen years younger, never moved. They stared intently at the Gothic-like front of the Senior Conservatives'.

"Look here, Eve," muttered the young man, and punched at the steering wheel. "Do you think this is going to work?"

"I don't know," the fair-haired girl confessed. "He absolutely loathes picnics."

"Anyway, we've probably missed him."

"Why so?"

"He can't have taken as long over lunch as that!" her companion protested, looking at a wristwatch. The young man was rather shocked. "It's a quarter to four! Even if . . ."

"Bill! There! Look there!"

Their patience was rewarded by an inspiring sight.

Out of the portals of the Senior Conservatives' Club, in awful majesty, marched a large, stout, barrel-shaped gentleman in a white linen suit.

His corporation preceded him like the figurehead of a man-of-war. His shell-rimmed spectacles were pulled down on a broad nose, all being shaded by a Panama hat. At the top of the stone steps he surveyed the street with a lordly sneer.

"Sir Henry!" called the girl.

"Hey?" said Sir Henry Merrivale.

"I'm Eve Drayton. Don't you remember me? You knew my father!"

"Oh, ah," said the great man.

"We've been waiting here a terribly long time," Eve pleaded. "Couldn't you see us for just five minutes?—The thing to do," she whispered to her companion, "is to keep him in a good humor. Just keep him in a good humor!"

As a matter of fact, H. M. was in a good humor, having just triumphed over the Home Secretary in an argument. But not even his own mother could have guessed it. Majestically, with the same lordly sneer, he began in grandeur to descend the steps of the

Senior Conservatives'. He did this, in fact, until his foot encountered an unnoticed object lying some three feet from the bottom.

It was a banana skin.

"Oh, dear!" said the girl.

Now it must be stated with regret that in the old days certain urchins, of what were then called the "lower orders," had a habit of placing such objects on the steps in the hope that some eminent statesman would take a toss on his way to Whitehall. This was a venial but deplorable practice, probably accounting for what Mr. Gladstone said in 1882.

In any case, it accounted for what Sir Henry Merrivale said now.

From the pavement, where H. M. landed in a seated position, arose in H. M.'s bellowing voice such a torrent of profanity, such a flood of invective and vile obscenities, as has seldom before blasted the holy calm of Pall Mall. It brought the hall porter hurrying down the steps, and Eve Drayton flying out of the car.

Heads were now appearing at the windows of the Atheneum across the street.

"Is it all right?" cried the girl, with concern in her blue eyes. "Are you hurt?"

H. M. merely looked at her. His hat had fallen off, disclosing a large bald head; and he merely sat on the pavement and looked at her.

"Anyway, H. M., get up! Please get up!"

"Yes, sir," begged the hall porter, "for heaven's sake get up!"

"Get up?" bellowed H. M., in a voice audible as far as St. James's Street. "Burn it all, how *can* I get up?"

"But why not?"

"My behind's out of joint," said H. M. simply. "I'm hurt awful bad. I'm probably goin' to have spinal dislocation for the rest of my life."

"But, sir, people are looking!"

H. M. explained what these people could do. He eyed Eve Drayton with a glare of indescribable malignancy over his spectacles.

"I suppose, my wench, *you're* responsible for this?"

Eve regarded him in consternation.

"You don't mean the banana skin?" she cried.

"Oh, yes, I do," said H. M., folding his arms like a prosecuting counsel.

"But we—we only wanted to invite you to a picnic!"

H. M. closed his eyes.

"That's fine," he said in a hollow voice. "All the same, don't you

think it'd have been a subtler kind of hint just to pour mayonnaise over my head or shove ants down the back of my neck? Oh, Lord love a duck!"

"I didn't mean that! I meant . . ."

"Let me help you up, sir," interposed the calm, reassuring voice of the dark-haired and blue-chinned young man who had been with Eve in the car.

"So you want to help too, hey? And who are *you*?"

"I'm awfully sorry!" said Eve. "I should have introduced you! This is my fiancé, Dr. William Sage."

H. M.'s face turned purple.

"I'm glad to see," he observed, "you had the uncommon decency to bring along a doctor. I appreciate that, I do. And the car's there, I suppose, to assist with the examination when I take off my pants?"

The hall porter uttered a cry of horror.

Bill Sage, either from jumpiness and nerves or from sheer inability to keep a straight face, laughed loudly.

"I keep telling Eve a dozen times a day," he said, "that I'm not to be called 'doctor.' I happen to be a surgeon—"

(Here H. M. really did look alarmed.)

"—but I don't think we need operate. Nor, in my opinion," Bill gravely addressed the hall porter, "will it be necessary to remove Sir Henry's trousers in front of the Senior Conservatives' Club."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"We had an infernal nerve to come here," the young man confessed to H. M. "But I honestly think, Sir Henry, you'd be more comfortable in the car. What about it? Let me give you a hand up?"

Yet even ten minutes later, when H. M. sat glowering in the back of the car and two heads were craned round toward him, peace was not restored.

"All right!" said Eve. Her pretty, rather stolid face was flushed; her mouth looked miserable. "If you won't come to the picnic, you won't. But I did believe you might do it to oblige me."

"Well . . . now!" muttered the great man uncomfortably.

"And I did think, too, you'd be interested in the other person who was coming with us. But Vicky's—difficult. She won't come either, if you don't."

"Oh? And who's this other guest?"

"Vicky Adams."

H. M.'s hand, which had been lifted for an oratorical gesture, dropped to his side.

"Vicky Adams? That's not the gal who . . . ?"

"Yes!" Eve nodded. "They say it was one of the great mysteries, twenty years ago, that the police failed to solve."

"It was, my wench," H. M. agreed somberly. "It was."

"And now Vicky's grown up. And we thought if you of all people went along, and spoke to her nicely, she'd tell us what really happened on that night."

H. M.'s small, sharp eyes fixed disconcertingly on Eve.

"I say, my wench. What's your interest in all this?"

"Oh, reasons," Eve glanced quickly at Bill Sage, who was again punching moodily at the steering wheel, and checked herself. "Anyway, what difference does it make now? If you won't go with us . . ."

H. M. assumed a martyred air.

"I never said I *wasn't* goin' with you, did I?" he demanded. (This was inaccurate, but no matter). "Even after you practically made a cripple of me, I never said I *wasn't* goin'?" His manner grew flurried and hasty. "But I got to leave now," he added apologetically. "I got to get back to my office."

"We'll drive you there, H. M."

"No, no, no," said the practical cripple, getting out of the car with surprising celerity. "Walkin' is good for my stomach if it's not so good for my behind. I'm a forgivin' man. You pick me up at my house tomorrow morning. G'bye."

And he lumbered off in the direction of the Haymarket.

It needed no close observer to see that H. M. was deeply abstracted. He remained so abstracted, indeed, as to be nearly murdered by a taxi at the Admiralty Arch; and he was halfway down Whitehall before a familiar voice stopped him.

"Afternoon, Sir Henry!"

Burly, urbane, buttoned up in blue serge, with his bowler hat and his boiled blue eye, stood Chief Inspector Masters.

"Bit odd," the chief inspector remarked affably, "to see you taking a constitutional on a day like this, and how are you, sir?"

"Awful," said H. M. instantly. "But that's not the point. Masters, you crawlin' snake! You're the very man I wanted to see."

Few things startled the chief inspector. This one did.

"You," he repeated, "wanted to see *me*?"

"Uh-huh."

"And what about?"

"Masters, do you remember the Victoria Adams case about twenty years ago?"



The chief inspector's manner suddenly changed and grew wary.

"Victoria Adams case?" he ruminated. "No, sir, I can't say I do."

"Son, you're lyin'! You were sergeant to old Chief Inspector Ruth-  
erford in those days, and well I remember it!"

Masters stood on his dignity.

"That's as may be, sir. But twenty years ago . . ."

"A little girl of twelve or thirteen, the child of very wealthy parents, disappeared one night out of a country cottage with all the doors and windows locked on the inside. A week later, while everybody was havin' screaming hysterics, the child reappeared again: through the locks and bolts, tucked up in her bed as usual. And to this day nobody's ever known what really happened."

There was a silence, while Masters shut his jaws hard.

"This family, the Adamses," persisted H. M., "owned the cottage, down Aylesbury way, on the edge of Goblin Wood, opposite the lake. Or was it?"

"Oh, ah," growled Masters. "It was."

H. M. looked at him curiously.

"They used the cottage as a base for bathin' in summer, and ice skatin' in winter. It was black winter when the child vanished, and the place was all locked up inside against drafts. They say her old man nearly went loopy when he found her there a week later, lying asleep under the lamp. But all she'd say, when they asked her where she'd been, was, 'I don't know.'"

Again there was a silence, while red buses thundered through the traffic press of Whitehall.

"You've got to admit, Masters, there was a flaming public rum-  
pus. I say: did you ever read Barrie's *Mary Rose*?"

"No."

"Well, it was a situation out of Barrie. Some people, y'see, said that Vicky Adams was a child of faërie who'd been spirited away by the pixies . . ."

Whereupon Masters exploded.

He removed his bowler hat and made remarks about pixies, in detail, which could not have been bettered by H. M. himself.

"I know, son, I know." H. M. was soothing. Then his big voice sharpened. "Now tell me. Was all this talk strictly true?"

"What talk?"

"Locked windows? Bolted doors? No attic trap? No cellar? Solid walls and floor?"

"Yes, sir," answered Masters, regaining his dignity with a pow-

erful effort, "I'm bound to admit it *was* true."

"Then there wasn't any jiggery-pokery about the cottage?"

"In your eye there wasn't," said Masters.

"How d'ye mean?"

"Listen, sir." Masters lowered his voice. "Before the Adamses took over that place, it was a hideout for Chuck Randall. At that time he was the swellest of the swell mob; we lagged him a couple of years later. Do you think Chuck wouldn't have rigged up some gadget for a getaway? Just so! Only . . ."

"Well? Hey?"

"We couldn't find it," grunted Masters.

"And I'll bet that pleased old Chief Inspector Rutherford?"

"I tell you straight: he was fair up the pole. Especially as the kid herself was a pretty kid, all big eyes and dark hair. You couldn't help trusting her story."

"Yes," said H. M. "That's what worries me."

"Worries you?"

"Oh, my son!" said H. M. dismally. "Here's Vicky Adams, the spoiled daughter of dotin' parents. She's supposed to be 'odd' and 'fey.' She's even encouraged to be. During her adolescence, the most impressionable time of her life, she gets wrapped round with the gauze of a mystery that people talk about even yet. What's that woman like now, Masters? What's that woman like now?"

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Miss Vicky Adams in her softest voice.

She said this just as William Sage's car, with Bill and Eve Drayton in the front seat, and Vicky and H. M. in the back seat, turned off the main road. Behind them lay the smoky-red roofs of Aylesbury, against a brightness of late afternoon. The car turned down a side road, a damp tunnel of greenery, and into another road which was little more than a lane between hedgerows.

H. M.—though cheered by three good-sized picnic hampers from Fortnum & Mason, their wickerwork lids bulging with a feast—did not seem happy. Nobody in that car was happy, with the possible exception of Miss Adams herself.

Vicky, unlike Eve, was small and dark and vivacious. Her large light brown eyes, with very black lashes, could be arch and coy; or they could be dreamily intense. The late Sir James Barrie might have called her a sprite. Those of more sober views would have recognized a different quality: she had an inordinate sex appeal.

which was as palpable as a physical touch to any male within yards. And despite her smallness, Vicky had a full voice like Eve's. All these qualities she used even in so simple a matter as giving traffic directions.

"First right," she would say, leaning forward to put her hands on Bill Sage's shoulders. "Then straight on until the next traffic light. Ah, clever boy!"

"Not at all, not at all!" Bill would disclaim, with red ears and rather an erratic style of driving.

"Oh, yes, you are!" And Vicky would twist the lobe of his ear, playfully, before sitting back again.

(Eve Drayton did not say anything. She did not even turn round. Yet the atmosphere, even of that quiet English picnic party, had already become a trifle hysterical.)

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Vicky, as they turned down into the deep lane between the hedgerows. "I do wish you wouldn't be so materialistic! I do, really. Haven't you the tiniest bit of spirituality in your nature?"

"Me?" said H. M. in astonishment. "I got a very lofty spiritual nature. But what I want just now, my wench, is grub.—Oi!"

Bill Sage glanced around.

"By that speedometer," H. M. pointed, "we've now come forty-six miles and a bit. We didn't even leave town until people of decency and sanity were having their tea. Where are we *going*?"

"But didn't you know?" asked Vicky, with wide-open eyes. "We're going to the cottage where I had such a dreadful experience when I was a child."

"Was it such a dreadful experience, Vicky dear?" inquired Eve. Vicky's eyes seemed far away.

"I don't remember, really. I was only a child, you see. I didn't understand. I hadn't developed the power for myself then."

"What power?" H. M. asked sharply.

"To dematerialize," said Vicky. "Of course."

In that warm sun-dusted lane, between the hawthorn hedges, the car jolted over a rut. Crockery rattled.

"Uh-huh. I see," observed H. M. without inflection. "And where do you go, my wench, when you dematerialize?"

"Into a strange country. Through a little door. You wouldn't understand. Oh, you *are* such philistines!" moaned Vicky. Then, with a sudden change of mood, she leaned forward and her whole physical allurements flowed again toward Bill Sage. "You wouldn't

like me to disappear, would you, Bill?"

(Easy! Easy!)

"Only," said Bill, with a sort of wild gallantry, "if you promised to reappear again straightaway."

"Oh, I should have to do that." Vicky sat back. She was trembling. "The power wouldn't be strong enough. But even a poor little thing like me might be able to teach you a lesson. Look there!"

And she pointed ahead.

On their left, as the lane widened, stretched the ten-acre gloom of what is fancifully known as Goblin Wood. On their right lay a small lake, on private property and therefore deserted.

The cottage—set well back into a clearing of the wood so as to face the road, screened from it by a line of beeches—was in fact a bungalow of rough-hewn stone, with a slate roof. Across the front of it ran a wooden porch. It had a seedy air, like the long yellow-green grass of its front lawn. Bill parked the car at the side of the road, since there was no driveway.

"It's a bit lonely, ain't it?" demanded H. M. His voice boomed out against that utter stillness, under the hot sun.

"Oh, yes!" breathed Vicky. She jumped out of the car in a whirl of skirts. "That's why *they* were able to come and take me. When I was a child."

"They?"

"Dear Sir Henry! Do I need to explain?" Then Vicky looked at Bill.

"I must apologize," she said, "for the state the house is in. I haven't been out here for months and months. There's a modern bathroom, I'm glad to say. Only kerosene lamps, of course. But then," a dreamy smile flashed across her face, "you won't need lamps, will you? Unless . . ."

"You mean," said Bill, who was taking a black case out of the car, "unless you disappear again?"

"Yes, Bill. And promise me you won't be frightened when I do."

The young man uttered a ringing oath which was shushed by Sir Henry Merrivale, who austereley said he disapproved of profanity. Eve Drayton was very quiet.

"But in the meantime," Vicky said wistfully, "let's forget it all, shall we? Let's laugh and dance and sing and pretend we're children! And surely our guest must be even more hungry by this time?"

It was in this emotional state that they sat down to their picnic. H. M., if the truth must be told, did not fare too badly. Instead

of sitting on some hummock of ground, they dragged a table and chairs to the shaded porch. All spoke in strained voices. But no word of controversy was said. It was only afterward, when the cloth was cleared, the furniture and hampers pushed indoors, the empty bottles flung away, that danger tapped a warning.

From under the porch Vicky fished out two half-rotted deck chairs, which she set up in the long grass of the lawn. These were to be occupied by Eve and H. M.; while Vicky took Bill Sage to inspect a plum tree of some remarkable quality she did not specify.

Eve sat down without comment. H. M., who was smoking a black cigar opposite her, waited some time before he spoke.

"Y'know," he said, taking the cigar out of his mouth, "you're behaving remarkably well."

"Yes," Eve laughed. "Aren't I?"

"Are you pretty well acquainted with this Adams gal?"

"I'm her first cousin," Eve answered simply. "Now that her parents are dead, I'm the only relative she's got. I know *all* about her."

From far across the lawn floated two voices saying something about wild strawberries. Eve, her fair hair and fair complexion vivid against the dark line of Goblin Wood, clenched her hands on her knees.

"You see, H. M.," she hesitated, "there was another reason why I invited you here. I—I don't quite know how to approach it."

"I'm the old man," said H. M., tapping himself impressively on the chest. "You tell me."

"Eve, darling!" interposed Vicky's voice, crying across the ragged lawn. "Coo-ee! Eve!"

"Yes, dear?"

"I've just remembered," cried Vicky, "that I haven't shown Bill over the cottage! You don't mind if I steal him away from you for a little while?"

"No, dear! Of course not!"

It was H. M., sitting so as to face the bungalow, who saw Vicky and Bill go in. He saw Vicky's wistful smile as she closed the door after them. Eve did not even look round. The sun was declining, making fiery chinks through the thickness of Goblin Wood behind the cottage.

"I won't let her have him," Eve suddenly cried. "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Does she want him, my wench? Or, which is more to the point, does he want her?"

"He never has," Eve said with emphasis. "Not really. And he never will."

H. M., motionless, puffed out cigar smoke.

"Vicky's a faker," said Eve. "Does that sound catty?"

"Not necessarily. I was just thinkin' the same thing myself."

"I'm patient," said Eve. Her blue eyes were fixed. "I'm terribly, terribly patient. I can wait for years for what I want. Bill's not making much money now, and I haven't got a bean. But Bill's got great talent under that easygoing manner of his. He *must* have the right girl to help him. If only . . ."

"If only the elfin spirit would let him alone. Hey?"

"Vicky acts like that," said Eve, "toward practically every man she ever meets. That's why she never married. She says it leaves her soul free to commune with other souls. This occultism—"

Then it all poured out, the family story of the Adamses. This repressed girl spoke at length, spoke as perhaps she had never spoken before. Vicky Adams, the child who wanted to attract attention, her father Uncle Fred and her mother Aunt Margaret seemed to walk in vividness as the shadows gathered.

"I was too young to know her at the time of the 'disappearance,' of course. But, oh, I knew her afterward! And I thought . . ."

"Well?"

"If I could get *you* here," said Eve, "I thought she'd try to show off with some game. And then you'd oppose her. And Bill would see what an awful faker she is. But it's hopeless! It's hopeless!"

"Looky here," observed H. M., who was smoking his third cigar. He sat up. "Doesn't it strike you those two are being a rummy-awful long time just in lookin' through a little bungalow?"

Eve, roused out of a dream, stared back at him. She sprang to her feet. She was not now, you could guess, thinking of any disappearance.

"Excuse me a moment," she said curtly.

Eve hurried across to the cottage, went up on the porch, and opened the front door. H. M. heard her heels rap down the length of the small passage inside. She marched straight back again, closed the front door, and rejoined H. M.

"All the doors of the rooms are shut," she announced in a high voice. "I really don't think I ought to disturb them."

"Easy, my wench!"

"I have absolutely no interest," declared Eve, with the tears coming into her eyes, "in what happens to either of them now. Shall we take the car and go back to town without them?"

H. M. threw his cigar, got up, and seized her by the shoulders. "I'm the old man," he said, leering like an ogre. "Will you listen to me?"

"No!"

"If I'm any reader of the human dial," persisted H. M., "that young feller's no more gone on Vicky Adams than I am. He was scared, my wench. Scared." Doubt, indecision crossed H. M.'s face. "I dunno what he's scared of. Burn me, I don't! But . . ."

"Hoy!" called the voice of Bill Sage.

It did not come from the direction of the cottage.

They were surrounded on three sides by Goblin Wood, now blurred with twilight. From the north side the voice bawled at them, followed by crackling in dry undergrowth. Bill, his hair and sports coat and flannels more than a little dirty, regarded them with a face of bitterness.

"Here are her blasted wild strawberries," he announced, extending his hand. "Three of 'em. The fruitful (excuse me) result of three quarters of an hour's hard labor. I absolutely refuse to chase 'em in the dark."

For a moment Eve Drayton's mouth moved without speech.

"Then you weren't . . . in the cottage all this time?"

"In the cottage?" Bill glanced at it. "I was in the cottage," he said, "about five minutes. Vicky had a woman's whim. She wanted some wild strawberries out of what she called the 'forest.'"

"Wait a minute, son!" said H. M. very sharply. "You didn't come out that front door. Nobody did."

"No! I went out the back door! It opens straight on the wood."

"Yes. And what happened then?"

"Well, I went to look for these damned . . ."

"No, no! What did *she* do?"

"Vicky? She locked and bolted the back door on the inside. I remember her grinning at me through the glass panel. She—"

Bill stopped short. His eyes widened, and then narrowed, as though at the impact of an idea. All three of them turned to look at the rough-stone cottage.

"By the way," said Bill. He cleared his throat vigorously. "By the way, have you seen Vicky since then?"

"No."

"This couldn't be . . . ?"

"It could be, son," said H. M. "We'd all better go in there and have a look."

They hesitated for a moment on the porch. A warm, moist fra-



grance breathed up from the ground after sunset. In half an hour it would be completely dark.

Bill Sage threw open the front door and shouted Vicky's name. That sound seemed to penetrate, reverberating, through every room. The intense heat and stuffiness of the cottage, where no windows had been raised in months, blew out at them. But nobody answered.

"Get inside," snapped H. M. "And stop yowlin'." The old maestro was nervous. "I'm dead sure she didn't get out by the front door; but we'll just make certain there's no slippin' out now."

Stumbling over the table and chairs they had used on the porch, he fastened the front door. They were in a narrow passage, once handsome with parquet floor and pine-paneled walls, leading to a door with a glass panel at the rear. H. M. lumbered forward to inspect this door and found it locked and bolted, as Bill had said.

Goblin Wood grew darker.

Keeping well together, they searched the cottage. It was not large, having two good-sized rooms on one side of the passage, and two small rooms on the other side, so as to make space for bathroom and kitchenette. H. M., raising fogs of dust, ransacked every inch where a person could possibly hide.

And all the windows were locked on the inside. And the chimney flues were too narrow to admit anybody.

And Vicky Adams wasn't there.

"Oh, my eye!" breathed Sir Henry Merrivale.

They had gathered, by what idiotic impulse not even H. M. could have said, just outside the open door of the bathroom. A bath tap dripped monotonously. The last light through a frosted-glass window showed three faces hung there as though disembodied.

"Bill," said Eve in an unsteady voice, "this is a trick. Oh, I've longed for her to be exposed! This is a trick!"

"Then where is she?"

"H. M. can tell us! Can't you, H. M.?"

"Well . . . now," muttered the great man.

Across H. M.'s Panama hat was a large black handprint, made there when he had pressed down the hat after investigating a chimney. He glowered under it.

"Son," he said to Bill; "there's just one question I want you to answer in all this hokey-pokey. When you went out pickin' wild strawberries, will you swear Vicky Adams didn't go with you?"

"As God is my judge, she didn't," returned Bill, with fervency

and obvious truth. "Besides, how the devil could she? Look at the lock and bolt on the back door!"

H. M. made two more violent black handprints on his hat.

He lumbered forward, his head down, two or three paces in the narrow passage. His foot half-skidded on something that had been lying there unnoticed, and he picked it up. It was a large, square section of thin, waterproof oilskin, jagged at one corner.

"Have you found anything?" demanded Bill in a strained voice.

"No. Not to make any sense, that is. But just a minute!"

At the rear of the passage, on the left-hand side, was the bedroom from which Vicky Adams had vanished as a child. Though H. M. had searched this room once before, he opened the door again.

It was now almost dark in Goblin Wood.

He saw dimly a room of twenty years before: a room of flounces, of lace curtains, of once-polished mahogany, its mirrors glimmering against white-papered walls. H. M. seemed especially interested in the windows.

He ran his hands carefully round the frame of each, even climbing laboriously up on a chair to examine the tops. He borrowed a box of matches from Bill; and the little spurts of light, following the rasp of the match, rasped against nerves as well. The hope died out of his face, and his companions saw it.

"H. M.," Bill said for the dozenth time, "where is she?"

"Son," replied H. M. despondently, "I don't know."

"Let's get out of here," Eve said abruptly. Her voice was a small scream. "I kn-know it's all a trick! I know Vicky's a faker! But let's get out of here. For God's sake let's get out of here!"

"As a matter of fact," Bill cleared his throat, "I agree. Anyway, we won't hear from Vicky until tomorrow morning."

"Oh, yes, you will," whispered Vicky's voice out of the darkness.

Eve screamed.

They lighted a lamp.

But there was nobody there.

Their retreat from the cottage, it must be admitted, was not very dignified.

How they stumbled down that ragged lawn in the dark, how they piled rugs and picnic hampers into the car, how they eventually found the main road again, is best left undescribed.

Sir Henry Merrivale has since sneered at this—"a bit of a goosy feeling; nothin' much"—and it is true that he had no nerves to

speak of. But he can be worried, badly worried; and that he was worried on this occasion may be deduced from what happened later.

H. M., after dropping in at Claridge's for a modest late supper of lobster and *pêche Melba*, returned to his house in Brook Street and slept a hideous sleep. It was three o'clock in the morning, even before the summer dawn, when the ringing of the bedside telephone roused him.

What he heard sent his blood pressure soaring.

"Dear Sir Henry!" crooned a familiar and spritelike voice.

H. M. was himself again, full of gall and bile. He switched on the bedside lamp and put on his spectacles with care, so as adequately to address the phone.

"Have I got the honor," he said with dangerous politeness, "of addressin' Miss Vicky Adams?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I sincerely trust," said H. M., "you've been havin' a good time? Are you materialized yet?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Where are you now?"

"I'm afraid," there was coy laughter in the voice, "that must be a little secret for a day or two. I want to teach you a really *good* lesson. Blessings, dear."

And she hung up the receiver.

H. M. did not say anything. He climbed out of bed. He stalked up and down the room, his corporation majestic under an old fashioned nightshirt stretching to his heels. Then, since he himself had been waked up at three o'clock in the morning, the obvious course was to wake up somebody else; so he dialed the home number of Chief Inspector Masters.

"No, sir," retorted Masters grimly, after coughing the frog out of his throat, "I do *not* mind you ringing me up. Not a bit of it!" He spoke with a certain pleasure. "Because I've got a bit of news for you."

H. M. eyed the phone suspiciously.

"Masters, are you trying to do me in the eye again?"

"It's what you always try to do to me, isn't it?"

"All right, all right!" growled H. M. "What's the news?"

"Do you remember mentioning the Vicky Adams case yesterday?"

"Sort of. Yes."

"Oh, ah! Well, I had a word or two round among our people. I

was tipped the wink to go and see a certain solicitor. He was old Mr. Fred Adams's solicitor before Mr. Adams died about six or seven years ago."

Here Masters's voice grew triumphant.

"I always said, Sir Henry, that Chuck Randall had planted some gadget in that cottage for a quick getaway. And I was right. The gadget was . . ."

"You were quite right, Masters. The gadget was a trick window."

The telephone, so to speak, gave a start.

"What's that?"

"A trick window." H. M. spoke patiently. "You press a spring. And the whole frame of the window, two leaves locked together, slides down between the walls far enough so you can climb over. Then you push it back up again."

*"How in lum's name do you know that?"*

"Oh, my son! They used to build windows like it in country houses during the persecution of Catholic priests. It was a good enough second guess. Only . . . it won't work."

Masters seemed annoyed. "It won't work now," Masters agreed. "And do you know why?"

"I can guess. Tell me."

"Because, just before Mr. Adams died, he discovered how his darling daughter had flummoxed him. He never told anybody except his lawyer. He took a handful of four-inch nails, and sealed up the top of that frame so tight an orangutan couldn't move it, and painted 'em over so they wouldn't be noticed."

"Uh-huh. You can notice 'em now."

"I doubt if the young lady herself ever knew. But, by George!" Masters said savagely. "I'd like to see anybody try the same game now!"

"You would, hey? Then will it interest you to know that the same gal has just disappeared out of the same house *again*?"

H. M. began a long narrative of the facts, but he had to break off because the telephone was raving.

"Honest, Masters," H. M. said seriously, "I'm not joking. She didn't get out through that window. But she did get out. You'd better meet me," he gave directions, "tomorrow morning. In the meantime, son, sleep well."

It was, therefore, a worn-faced Masters who went into the Visitors' Room at the Senior Conservatives' Club just before lunch on the following day.

The Visitors' Room is a dark sepulchral place, opening on an air well, where the visitor is surrounded by pictures of dyspeptic-looking gentlemen with beards. It has a pervading mustiness of wood and leather. Though whisky and soda stood on the table, H. M. sat in a leather chair far away from it, ruffling his hands across his bald head.

"Now, Masters, keep your shirt on!" he warned. "This business may be rummy. But it's not a police matter—yet."

"I know it's not a police matter," Masters said grimly. "All the same, I've had a word with the superintendent at Aylesbury."

"Fowler?"

"You know him?"

"Sure. I know everybody. Is he goin' to keep an eye out?"

"He's going to have a look at that ruddy cottage. I've asked him for any telephone calls to be put through here. In the meantime, sir—"

It was at this point, as though diabolically inspired, that the telephone rang. H. M. reached it before Masters.

"It's the old man," he said, unconsciously assuming a stance of grandeur. "Yes, yes! Masters is here, but he's drunk. You tell me first. What's that?"

The telephone talked thinly.

"Sure I looked in the kitchen cupboard," bellowed H. M. "Though I didn't honestly expect to find Vicky Adams hidin' there. What's that? Say it again! Plates? Cups that had been . . ."

An almost frightening change had come over H. M.'s expression. He stood motionless. All the posturing went out of him. He was not even listening to the voice that still talked thinly, while his eyes and his brain moved to put together facts. At length (though the voice still talked) he hung up the receiver.

H. M. blundered back to the center table, where he drew out a chair and sat down.

"Masters," he said very quietly, "I've come close to makin' the silliest mistake of my life."

Here he cleared his throat.

"I shouldn't have made it, son. I really shouldn't. But don't yell at me for cuttin' off Fowler. I can tell you now that Vicky Adams disappeared. And she said one true thing when she said she was going into a strange country."

"How do you mean?"

"She's dead," answered H. M.

The word fell with heavy weight into that dingy room, where the bearded faces looked down.

"Y'see," H. M. went on blankly, "a lot of us were right when we thought Vicky Adams was a faker. She was. To attract attention to herself, she played that trick on her family with the hocused window. She's lived and traded on it ever since. That's what sent me straight in the wrong direction. I was on the alert for some *trick* Vicky Adams might play. So it never occurred to me that this elegant pair of beauties, Miss Eve Drayton and Mr. William Sage, were deliberately conspirin' to murder *her*."

Masters got slowly to his feet.

"Did you say . . . murder?"

"Oh, yes."

Again H. M. cleared his throat.

"It was all arranged beforehand for me to be a witness. They knew Vicky Adams couldn't resist a challenge to disappear, especially as Vicky always believed she could get out of the trick window. They wanted Vicky to *say* she was goin' to disappear. They never knew anything about the trick window, Masters. But they knew their own plan very well.

"Eve Drayton even told me the motive. She hated Vicky, of course. But that wasn't the main point. She was Vicky Adams's only relative; she'd inherit an awful big scoopful of money. Eve said she could be patient. (And, burn me, how her eyes meant it when she said that!) Rather than risk any slightest suspicion of murder, she was willing to wait seven years until a disappeared person can be presumed dead.

"Our Eve, I think, was the fiery drivin' force of that conspiracy. She was only scared part of the time. Sage was scared all of the time. But it was Sage who did the real dirty work. He lured Vicky Adams into that cottage, while Eve kept me in close conversation on the lawn . . ."

H. M. paused.

Intolerably vivid in the mind of Chief Inspector Masters, who had seen it years before, rose the picture of the rough-stone bungalow against the darkling wood.

"Masters," said H. M., "why should a bath tap be dripping in a house that hadn't been occupied for months?"

"Well?"

"Sage, y'see, is a surgeon. I saw him take his black case of instruments out of the car. He took Vicky Adams into that house.

In the bathroom he stabbed her, he stripped her, and he *dismembered her body in the bathtub*. —Easy, son!”

“Go on,” said Masters without moving.

“The head, the torso, the folded arms and legs, were wrapped up in three large square pieces of thin transparent oilskin. Each was sewed up with coarse thread so the blood wouldn’t drip. Last night I found one of the oilskin pieces he’d ruined when his needle slipped at the corner. Then he walked out of the house, with the back door still standin’ unlocked, to get his wild-strawberry alibi.”

“Sage went out of there,” shouted Masters, “leaving the body in the house?”

“Oh, yes,” agreed H. M.

“But where did he leave it?”

H. M. ignored this.

“In the meantime, son, what about Eve Drayton? At the end of the arranged three quarters of an hour, she indicated there was hanky-panky between her fiancé and Vicky Adams. She flew into the house. But what did she do?

“She walked to the back of the passage. I heard her. *There she simply locked and bolted the back door*. And then she marched out to join me with tears in her eyes. And these two beauties were ready for investigation.”

“Investigation?” said Masters. “*With that body still in the house?*”

“Oh, yes.”

Masters lifted both fists.

“It must have given young Sage a shock,” said H. M., “when I found that piece of waterproof oilskin he’d washed but dropped. Anyway, these two had only two more bits of hokey-pokey. The ‘vanished’ gal had to speak—to show she was still alive. If you’d been there, son, you’d have noticed that Eve Drayton’s got a voice just like Vicky Adams’s. If somebody speaks in a dark room, carefully imitatin’ a coy tone she never uses herself, the illusion’s goin’ to be pretty good. The same goes for a telephone.

“It was finished, Masters. All that had to be done was remove the body from the house, and get it far away from there . . .”

“But that’s just what I’m asking you, sir! Where was the body all this time? And who in blazes *did* remove the body from the house?”

“All of us did,” answered H. M.

“What’s that?”

“Masters,” said H. M., “aren’t you forgettin’ the picnic hampers?”



And now, the chief inspector saw, H. M. was as white as a ghost. His next words took Masters like a blow between the eyes.

"Three good-sized wickerwork hampers, with lids. After our big meal on the porch, those hampers were shoved inside the house where Sage could get at 'em. He had to leave most of the used crockery behind, in the kitchen cupboard. But three wickerwork hampers from a picnic, and three butcher's parcels to go inside 'em. I carried one down to the car myself. It felt a bit funny . . ."

H. M. stretched out his hand, not steadily, toward the whisky. "Y'know," he said, "I'll always wonder if I was carrying the—head."

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### **SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":**

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It appears that Christopher Watson will not be a junior partner for long. By adding his own car to the total of eighteen he was able to give half (nine) to Chauncey, one-third (six) to Willard, and one-ninth (two) to Alistair making a total of seventeen. There is one left over, presumably the Toyota, for himself.



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by Carol Harper



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MARTHA GRIMES

“He loved winter above all seasons, . . . rain over sunshine, mist over a clear view. A bloody melancholic.” So CID Detective Superintendent Richard Jury describes himself, and by author Martha Grimes’s latest book in the Jury series, **The Old Silent** (Little, Brown, \$18.95, 425 pp), this melancholy is a major point of characterization, a change since this series was last reviewed in these pages in November, 1984. We have followed Jury through promotions, encounters with eccentric characters, and crises with neighbors in ten books to date (all published in hardcover by Little, Brown): *The Man with a Load of Mischief* (1981), *The Old Fox Deceiv’d* (1982), *The Anodyne Necklace* (1983),

*The Dirty Duck* (1984), *Jerusalem Inn* (1984), *Help the Poor Struggler* (1985), *The Deer Leap* (1985), *I Am the Only Running Footman* (1986), *The Five Bells and Bladebone* (1987), and *The Old Silent* (1989). But aside from a few scattered points of physical description—he has light grey eyes and reddish brown hair, is 6’2” tall, and has a “ravishing” smile—we know very little about Richard Jury.

However, we do know one fact about his past that may be the major contributor to Jury’s melancholy: the death of his parents when he was a small boy. As described in *The Old Fox Deceiv’d*, “. . . —the war. Both his father and mother had gone in it. His father at Dunkirk and his mother in the last blitz of London. When he was

seven years old, their home had collapsed around the two of them like a house of cards. In the darkness he had searched for her through the night until he had seen her arm, her hand lying against the rubble, thrown out from underneath as it might have been thrown out from under a dark coverlet in her sleep. . . . He could never glimpse a woman's hand after that, an arm lying against the dark cloth of a chair or the wood of a dining table—just the hand and arm, not the face, not the body—without that piercing numbness, as if his mind had been cauterized.”

Jury lives in a seedy but not unpleasant Islington neighborhood which fronts on a little park across the way. “[His] own flat was on the second floor. There were five others, and he scarcely saw his neighbors because of his weird hours.” His flat is unkempt, and he is “always dismayed by the mess, as if thieves had just ransacked his rooms and made a fast exit.”

Despite his oftentimes grisly job with New Scotland Yard, Jury remains a kind, considerate man. A clue to his gentle nature is his relationships with children. In almost every book of the series, there is a child who, if not a witness to or victim of the crime Jury is investigating, is befriended by Jury

along the way. Some seek Jury out, like the young brother and his silent (but giggling) sister who follow Jury around in the snow during one investigation; Addie, who first greets him from a tree just inside the gates of an orphanage and dares him to guess her full name; and the fierce and scared Penny Faraday, who enlists Jury's help in the search for her kidnapped brother while Jury looks for a particularly gruesome murderer. Many of the children are orphaned like Jury and, perhaps, this similarity draws him to them. Jury, though, too, is what his associate Chief Superintendent Brian Macalvie calls a “minder”: a “kind of cop who watches over frails.” Richard Jury watches over these children, as well as others he sees as vulnerable, with his quiet grey eyes.

Jury loves his job, however difficult it is to perform in his growing melancholy, and he is good at it. He starts as an inspector in the series and is promoted to detective superintendent along the way. However, Jury is not the sole detective in the series. He is simply the policeman half of a team which includes his friend Melrose Plant, the eighth Earl of Caverness—or was, anyway, before he renounced his many titles. Plant can snoop where it

is not ethical or legal for Jury to probe. And he does so, quite effectively. Plant's family connections, fabulous wealth, personality, and good looks allow him to insinuate himself into the lives of the titled and the wealthy who are almost always involved when murder occurs in this series.

Grimes has peppered her books with a cast of supporting characters who contribute lightness, humor, and, sometimes, romance. Among the better drawn continuing support characters is Jury's police associate Sergeant Alfred Wiggins, who is ever chewing, drinking, or brewing up some remedy to the dread diseases to which he is certain he is susceptible. Throughout the series, Wiggins emerges—cough drops in hand—as a sensitive, intuiti-

tive young man, able to draw out witnesses over a hot cuppa. Jury's admiration for Wiggins grows, and as Wiggins's confidence increases through Jury's guidance, his hypochondria lessens—a bit.

Martha Grimes is an American writing mysteries set in England. This may offend a few purists, but this series is well worth reading for the delightful descriptions of English countryside and London cityscapes, as well as the carefully wrought characterization. Further, Grimes's clever mysteries and still cleverer clues make hers a series sure to entice and intrigue readers who favor "whodunits."

Martha Grimes's newest book, *The Old Contemptibles*, will be available in January, 1991, from Little, Brown.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**T**he much-ballyhooed **Dick Tracy** begins simply. We see a watch, a badge, and a gun. But what makes Warren Beatty's screen adaptation of the crime-fighting comic character a treat for hardboiled mystery mavens is the portrayal of Tracy as a detective with a brain. And one who's up against a criminal element that knows how to cross, double-cross, and even triplecross when necessary.

The bad guys are led by Al Pacino as the power-hungry Big Boy Caprice, a mobster adept at misquoting Jefferson, Plato, or Nietzsche with equal ease. Caprice and his cronies (such as Flattop, Pruneface, the Brow, and Little Face) are comical. But let there be no mistake about it, they are bad. This crook is trying to put the organized in organized crime. Tracy is his biggest obstacle.

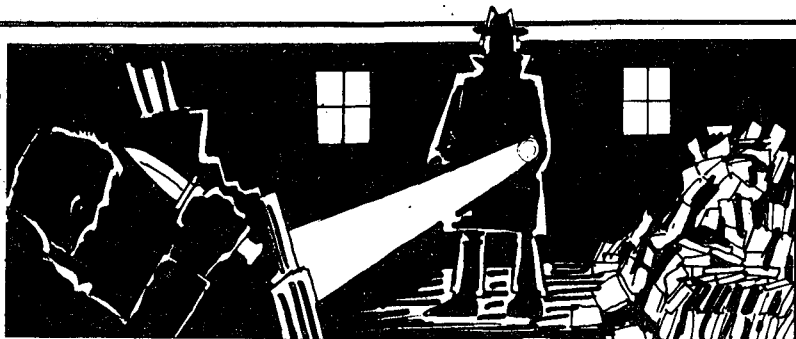
When a band of Big Boy's fe-

dora-festooned, cardplaying bad guys are rubbed out in a run-down warehouse, the herald goes out, "Calling Dick Tracy, calling Dick Tracy." And the crimestopper starts his stopping.

Essentially, the story has Tracy trying to nail Big Boy for the murder of Lips Manis, owner of the Club Ritz. He's the man behind the big warehouse job. But before Big Boy does Lips away with "the bath," a cement bath that is, he makes him sign the club lease over to him.

Enter the fringe benefit, Breathless Mahoney (Madonna), a white-hot torch singer with curves like Betty Boop and lips that part like the Red Sea. She's the headliner at the Ritz, was Lips' girl, and is a witness to Lips' murder.

Tracy needs her to nail Big Boy. But she wants one thing in return—Tracy. The detective, however, is already a taken



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man. His sweetheart is Tess Trueheart, played with patience by Glennie Headly. Poor, sweet, domestic Tess suffers silently for her man. And when she's kidnapped by one bad guy or another, it quickens the pace a notch or two.

Other pitfalls that litter Tracy's path to the triumph of justice include a not-so-nice district attorney (Dick Van Dyke) and a setup that frames the much revered detective for murder.

Along the way, Tracy picks up a stray waif who calls himself Kid. If anyone steals the show, in a film filled with fabulous characters and fabulous performances, it's Charlie Korsmo as the Kid. This street urchin fights to stay out of the orphanage while working his way into Tracy's heart and job. The Kid even manages to save Tracy's life and become a junior detective.

When the very shady-looking No Face enters the fray with a mysterious offer to get Tracy out of Big Boy's way, relayed by way of piano player 88 Keys, the plot thickens. All along Big Boy is reluctant to rub out the popular detective, knowing that he would be the prime suspect.

No one is sure whom No Face is working for, or what he will do, which adds a few twists to the storyline.

Another standout in a slew

of very watchable characters is Dustin Hoffman as Mumbles. He's a Big Boy gangmember who plays both sides of the fence to be on the safe side. His delightful mumbling gives fits to the court stenographer trying to take down his statement but doesn't ruffle Tracy's feathers at all.

Although *Dick Tracy* has its share of car-chasing, bang-bang, shoot-'em-up action, it's not at all another throw-away action movie. And best of all, it is unpredictable.

Warren Beatty, in the title role, appears reserved, especially when compared with the rest of the colorful cast. But with his square jaw, yellow coat, and hat-to-match, he does a tidy job.

While Beatty's vision of *Dick Tracy* on the big screen gives it a vividly-colored comic strip palette, the film has the unmistakable feel of a black and white crime yarn from the 1930's or 1940's. The remarkable sets—the panoramas of old New York at twilight, the dingy waterfronts, Tracy's dull, municipal office—also contribute to the feel. And Danny Elfman, who provides the music, should get an award for his Gershwin-sounding score.

All in all, this long-dormant flatfoot comes alive on the screen in a picture-perfect vision of crime-fighting.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious Photo-Albert Bashover of Delray mentions go to A. C. Stoneada; Lorraine Ruggiero of Art Cosing of Fairfax,

Weatherford, Texas; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada; Melanie Strong of Rapid City, Manitoba, Canada; Larry D. Preece of Anaheim, California; Myrl Wheeler of Boise, Idaho; Linda Steimle of Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Mary A. McKissack of Nashville, Tennessee.

graph contest was won by Beach, Florida. Honorable of Windsor, Ontario, Canada; Nashua, New Hampshire; Virginia; Pam Tatum of

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## MODUS OPERANDI by Albert Bashover

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"You see, Smedley," said the Great Detective, "all criminals have a modus operandi. When I realized that our picnic today was one day after the Fourth of July, and that the theft occurred at precisely five o'clock, I knew exactly how our thief made his escape."

"I don't understand," panted the ever faithful Smedley, as he looked up at the Great Detective with moist spaniel eyes.

"Why it's obvious. Of all the days of the month, of all the hours in the day, our thief took the fifth!"

"And did he take our keg of beer? Did he take the gallon of wine? No! He took a small bottle of whisky. He took the fifth, Smedley!"

"Amazing!" murmured the awed Smedley.

"Observe, Smedley. There were five boats on the shore this morning. How many do you see now?"

"Uh, four, sir."

"Exactly, Smedley. He took the fifth, you see."

A flicker of understanding almost made it to Smedley's eye, but it died somewhere along the optic nerve.

"We will find our fleeing felon in the purloined punt, with a finished flask on the farther shore," continued the Great Detective. "He will thwart our attempts to interrogate him by saying that he refuses to answer on the grounds that it may incriminate him."

"But how can you know that?" queried the confused Smedley.

"Oh come now," sniffed the Great Detective. "He will take the fifth, of course."

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Publishers' overstocks, remainders, imports—over 3,000 titles at up to 80% savings in our **FREE CATALOG!** Biography, History, Art, Nature, Gardening, Cooking, Fiction—something for everyone, including about 600 new titles monthly. Write:

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# PLACE

# CLASSIFIED

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**IF** you are interested in what I am selling, send \$2.00 and address to: BJ Lussier, P.O. Box 435, Allyn, WA 98524.

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## MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

**GOOD MONEY!** Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start Immediately! Enclose stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-9983.

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**ASSEMBLE** Products at home! For Free Information Call Toll Free: 1-800-462-1128 Ext. 90-24.

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**HAVE A PROBLEM? ATHENA LOUISE REPLIES.** Send your problem and \$1.00 to: Athena Louise, P.O. Box 29475, Los Angeles, CA 90029.

## \*SHORT STORY CONTEST\* WIN \$1,000.00 (1st Prize)

**MYSTERIQUES** is Conducting its **FALL Short Story Contest!** We're Looking For The Best Short Stories You Can Write. The Stories Can Be Either Mystery, Intrigue, Or Suspense, And Must Be Unpublished. We Will Critique Each And Every Story, Choose The 10 Best, And Then Award Each Of The 10 Winners With A Certified Check In Accordance With Their Standings.

### CONDITIONS

- 1) Stories must be original work and contain from 3,000 to 5,000 words, typed or printed on 8 1/2" x 11" paper.
- 2) Contest FEE is only \$5.00 (1 story), \$8.00 (2 stories), \$10.00 (3 stories). [A Maximum of 3 stories per writer]
- 3) Please Attach S.A.S.E. if Material is to be returned.

### PRIZES

- 1st Prize - One Winner - \$1,000.00
- 2nd Prize - Two Winners - \$250.00 Each
- 3rd Prize - Three Winners - \$100.00 Each
- 4th Prize - Four Winners - \$50.00 Each

Contest Starts Sept. 15, 1990 & Ends Nov. 30, 1990.  
Stories must be post-marked by Nov. 30 to qualify.  
Winners will be notified Dec. 30, 1990.

Mail Stories And Contest Fees, In Check Or Money Order Payable to: >

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PROHIBITED

MYSTERIQUES  
PO BOX 1544 Dept. B8  
COOPER STATION  
NYC, NY, 10276.

## PERSONAL

**BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH SPEAKING** Filipinas want men of all ages as Life Partners. Videos available: PAL, 51 Blanca, CO 81123-0051. 1-900-860-3033. \$3.00/per minute. Adults.

**NICE SINGLES** with Christian values wish to meet others. FREE magazine. Send age, interests. Singles, P.O. Box 310-IO, Allardt, TN 38504.

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**SAVE MONEY TOO—  
BY READING and ANSWERING  
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# Classified Continued

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**ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage.** Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

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**CUSTOM designed blankets for your dog or cat.** Custom Petz, 7210 Jordan Avenue, Suite D43, Canoga Park, CA 91303.

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## SONGWRITERS

**POEMS WANTED.** Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

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**OLDTIME radio programs.** Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

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**Who killed Winston Philips?**  
You could be one of 5 people  
to win \$1000 in the newest  
mystery game ever!

**Call:**  
**1-900-535-2900**  
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for complete information and  
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**\$2.00 per minute**

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**PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:**

**Combo #1, Combo #2, or Combo #3.**

**Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.**

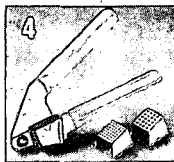
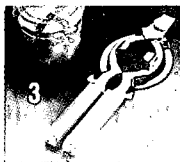
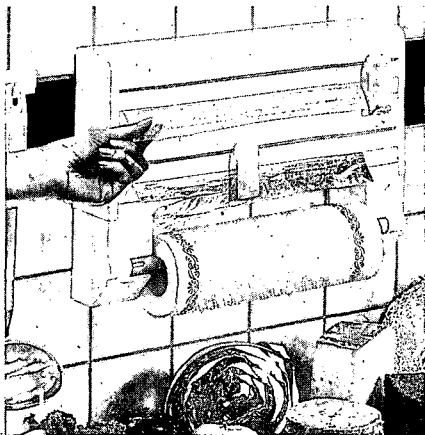
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# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

## ▼ PERFECT KITCHEN ROLL DISPENSER AND 3 PIECE KITCHEN TOOL KIT

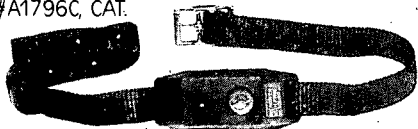
**D**o kitchen wraps have you all thumbs? Then THE Perfect Kitchen Dispenser is for you. It's the only one that, cut after cut, holds the roll end ready to be picked up and pulled out for the next sheet. The two "neat sheet" cutters feature stainless steel blades for cutting that's a cinch. Holds standard rolls of cling-film, aluminum foil, or wax paper plus a paper towel holder. Simple front loading procedure makes replacement a snap. Sleek white and grey design fits any decor. But there's more: it comes with state of the art hand can opener, super strong jar and bottle opener, and impressive garlic/onion press with 2 inserts for fine and coarse pressing. So get a handle on kitchen wraps and treat yourself.  
**\$69.98** (\$8.50) #A1954.



1. DISPENSER
2. HAND CAN OPENER
3. JAR AND BOTTLE OPENER
4. GARLIC/ONION PRESS

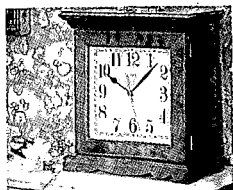
## ▼ DO FLEAS HAVE EARS?

**T**he Microtech Flea Collar with its blasts of ultrasound creates such an intolerable environment that fleas and ticks abandon their pet hosts within 5 days. It is designed specifically for fleas and focuses on a 4' zone of protection, the Microtech Collar outperforms other kinds of ultrasonic pest chasers. A vast improvement over poison powders and chemical collars. Works on cats or dogs. Adjustable 19" collar fits 97% of dogs and runs for 6-8 months on 2 lithium cells (included). You can afford to see if it really works because you are fully protected by our guarantee — you have nothing to lose but the fleas!  
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## ▼ A TIMELY SECRET



Do you have valuables or other important items that need a secure and secret hiding place? Why not store them in an elegant 17<sup>th</sup>

century reproduction of a mantelpiece clock! Handcrafted in cherry, and accented with solid brass, the clock has large antique style numbers and features a quartz powered movement. This lovely accent piece measures 13" (h) x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (w) x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (d) and will grace any dresser, desk or mantel. The clock face opens to reveal 3 fabric lined drawers and a larger (10" x 4" x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " ), compartment, complete with key. Beauty and security in one lovely piece—what a timely idea! **\$99.98** (\$8.00) #A1917.



## ▼ TEACH AN OLD LAMP NEW TRICKS

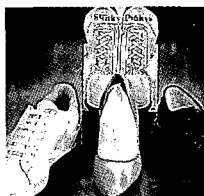


Any lamp that takes a standard bulb can be updated with the Touchtronic dimmer. No rewiring needed—just screw into lamp socket. Then your touch on any metal part becomes the "switch"—touch once for low light, again for medium, a third time for full wattage. Handy when you're entering a dark room, great at bedside and a real comfort to the arthritic or the ill. You'll save time, money and electricity—no

more 3-way bulbs to buy and you pay for only as much light as you need. U.L. listed; one-year factory warranty. **\$15.98** (\$4.00) #A1700. 2 for **\$27.98** (\$6.00) #A17002.



## ▼ FRESHENED FOOTWEAR



Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running

shoes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anything that goes on your feet. And keeps on working, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in the sun for a day every three months or so to restore their odor-catching ability. Three pairs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes or boots, costs **\$19.98** (\$4.00) #13263.

**TO ORDER:** Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 110 HK; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

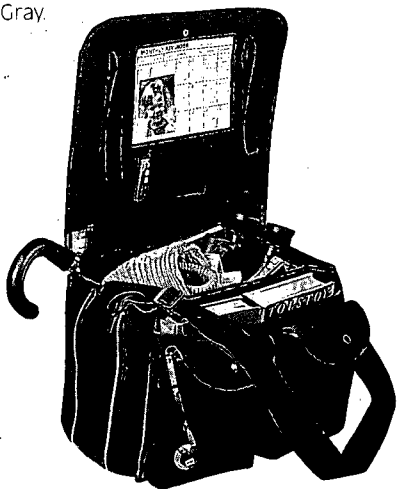
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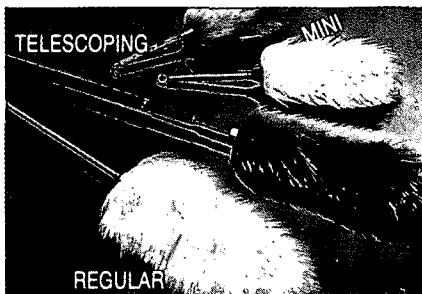
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## ▽ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors, **\$24.98** (\$4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.



## ▽ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

## ▽ TALKING ALARM CLOCK



Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½" x 3" x 4". **\$27.98** (\$4.50) #A1916.

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